

Encircling the Muses: the multi-disciplinary heritage of university museums

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Resumo

Os museus universitários possuem um longo e fecundo passado, tendo desempenhado um papel crucial na evolução dos museus e das coleções em geral. Na realidade, algumas das mais importantes coleções encontram-se, presentemente, ou no seio ou associadas a uma universidade. Porém, os museus universitários no seu todo necessitam de enfrentar algumas questões problemáticas que, se não forem devidamente resolvidas, poderão reduzir a sua esfera de influência e suscitar frustrações nos seus profissionais. Por exemplo, muitos museus universitários sentir-se-ão divididos, sub-financiados, poderão julgar que não contribuem de forma eficaz para os mais recentes desenvolvimentos museológicos exteriores aos muros do campus, no mundo mais vasto dos outros museus. Por outro lado, os museus universitários poderão sentir-se isolados no próprio interior do campus, com dificuldades em atingir e servir as diversas comunidades que lhes estão mais próximas. O novo comité internacional do ICOM – ICOM-UMAC – deverá apoiar o debate destas questões e estimular nos museus universitários a necessidade de contribuir de forma intensa quer para a própria comunidade académica quer para o desenvolvimentos dos museus em geral.

Abstract

University museums have a rich history, having played a crucial role in the development of collections and museums. Some of the most important museum collections today are to be found within or attached to a university. However, university museums also have identity, resource and audience issues to address, that – if not resolved positively – can restrict their influence and lead to frustrations of unfulfilled potential professionally. They may feel divided, under-resourced, and be insufficiently contributing to new museological developments beyond the university setting, in the larger world of museums located visibly in the public sphere. On the other hand, university museums may be confined even within their own campus location, and be insufficiently reaching out to their multiple communities close at hand. It is to be hoped that the new International Committee of ICOM – ICOM-UMAC – can assist in analysing these issues and stimulate university museums to make an expansive contribution both to their own academic communities and to museum developments generally.

Introduction

I would like to begin by welcoming the recently created International Committee of ICOM, ICOM-UMAC, into the larger professional organisation and networks of the International Council of Museums. My remarks hereafter are as a personal interlocutor and colleague, not an expression of ICOM's formal positions or policy.

Among early tasks facing UMAC is that of being able to address consciously (but not necessarily resolving)

some multiple identity issues. One difficulty is that of managing the differences between museums in prominent public locales with a direct interface with society and a broad audience, and museums located in universities whose character and responsibilities are differently disposed. Another identity dislocation may occur *within* the university setting itself: between the orientation and first-line responsibilities of museums with a duty to their collections and public(s), and the sometimes contrary objectives and resource-allocations within universities focused on teaching and research that

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may have little connection to the museums or collections that exist on campus. These tensions can pull people in university museums in many different directions simultaneously, and deserve reflection on how best to handle them. Comparative case studies of successful university museums would build up valuable professional resources over time.

It is important for new members of UMAC to achieve, if not a sense of singular identity (for there are many identities co-existing productively in all museum organizations), then at least a constellation of shared objectives in these early years together as an International Committee of ICOM – as has begun to be addressed in the early published statement, entitled ‘UMAC’s Role’. These initial, formal tasks are not merely bureaucratic or perfunctory. They are useful in clarifying what has brought about this new entity, what it seeks to achieve, and to help to ‘clear the way’ to address other, more imaginatively challenging tasks on behalf of the collections, disciplines, and institutions invoked by the new body. I will speak a little later about the question of university museums’ audience and public.

The collegial resources of university museums

A few words first about the rich resources that university museums bring to ICOM. It scarcely needs emphasising that an understanding of university museums’ current circumstances should be historically informed, in order to connect earlier histories with present opportunities across a dramatically changed horizon of developmental possibility. Pursuing the new is not a virtue in itself. Museums are rightly oriented to conserving an awareness of our connections with the past, locating developments today within a larger context of institutional evolution.

A valuable contribution university museum colleagues can make to the museums sector in general is to maintain examination of the comparative

evolution of museums. It is important to nourish insight into processes whereby museums pursue legibility and coherence as cultural heritage institutions that have emerged in particular settings historically, drawing on a rich legacy of earlier achievements. Some of the most remarkable museums that exist today have emerged through the evolution of the world’s oldest universities. This is an invaluable part of the historical record and inheritance of museums generally. Moreover, it distinguishes museums from other institutions and professional communities in modern society that do not have direct responsibility for conservation of heritage collections and resources, or their interpretation, sustainability and renewal.

The academy as intellectual laboratory

In my own current research on museums and their altering roles, I am interested to reflect upon the many new disciplinary engagements, marriages and divorces in the intellectual sociosphere of the academy (universities) in recent years, and their impact within museums.

There have been shifts and changing alliances within academic studies in the last three decades that reflect an intense combustion of new critical thought within the humanities. It is salutary to trace how this has involved varying, sometimes almost contradictory movements. For example, by the 1980s the impact of ‘deconstructionist’ philosophy and semiological theory on literary interpretation was seriously diminishing the prestige of ‘authorship’ and ‘authenticity’ in favour of emphasising the broader operations of collective textual production in a culture. However, this was followed gradually by a counter-tendency emerging within the same schools of thought: a revived interest in first-person voices, a resurgent emphasis on subjectivity, personal agency, and narrative grounding. We can notice these latter changes in the current ascendancy of new forms of biography, utilising diaries, interviews, the

testimony of ‘witnesses’ and other primary-source materials in innovative ways. The gradual effects of these shifts of attention can also be traced within the practices of museums.

The flux in many writing genres over the last decade or more, together with academic critiques of historicism (sharply questioning the framing assumptions behind the objectivity of traditional History’s methodology) have had an echoing impact on issues of personalised ‘voice’ versus anonymous ‘authority’ in modes of public communication in museums. The partiality of all acts of interpretation has been highlighted in new museographical practices: the appearance in some museums of ‘authored’ labels and wall texts; primary-source statements used alongside objects displayed; quotations and excerpts from scholars and curators appearing as mounted texts within the space of exhibitions, not simply confined to catalogues; ‘testimonial’ accounts from ‘actors’ contingent to the content of social history or ‘ethnographical’ displays; even deliberately juxtaposed statements offering contrasting interpretations of the same facts, objects, or circumstances. Meanwhile, history and historiography have been challenged by the rise of ‘memory discourse’, and the positioning of Memory (with its direct reliance on subjectivity, especially around matters of intense trauma, such as the Holocaust, or the ‘Stolen Generation’ of Aboriginal people in Australian history) as implacably exceeding and alternative to the empiricist tools and distancing voice of History (KLEIN 2000).

In stressing such developments, emerging in a period of intense ferment within academic study in the human sciences evident in universities worldwide for several decades, I pose a question that I return to near the end of this paper: To what extent have university museums been playing a leading role in articulating these changes and amplifying their implications for the practices of museums, or to what extent have university museums lagged behind the

innovative self-questioning taken up by museums elsewhere?

For example, the theoretical upheavals surrounding the orthodoxy of ‘history’ and the raw urgency of ‘memory’ and ‘identity’ in a globally transforming world that have tensioned academic debate in the social sciences have been echoed in the establishment of new types of museums and forms of public commemoration. This can be seen in the rise of migration museums, and museums connected to sites of historical trauma and death (the former Khmer Rouge prison of Tuol Sleng, now the Museum of Genocide in Cambodia, for example; or the *Topographie des Terrors* [Topography of Terror] permanent exhibition in the former basements of the headquarters of the Nazi SS machine near the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin). Such site-museums dedicated to particular histories of catastrophic oppression and suffering, the various Holocaust museums – and indeed the wide public consciousness of new kinds of public monuments such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington – all reflect profound changes in society’s imagination about history, power, equity and ‘progress’. They bring into tangible forms of thought and experience an altered historical consciousness that has been shaped by new ideas and critical debate internationally.

Currents of new critical thought inevitably do stimulate altered practices in cultural heritage institutions. They act as midwife of change. They create new systems of connection. Indeed, since UMAC itself was formed, one other new International Committee of ICOM has been created directly as a reflection of the evolving climate of social and intellectual awareness I have described: this committee is IC MEMO (or International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of Victims of Public Crimes – a conceptualisation unthinkable some years ago, but emerging from a climate of widening consensus internationally about trans-national or ‘universal’ rights)².

² In the early case documents put forward by this Committee for admittance to ICOM, the key phrase indicating the professional target area specified museums or sites concerned with ‘crimes against humanity’. This phrasing was a little changed in the final decision on an acronym and nomenclature that worked across ICOM’s three official languages, and the outcome became a committee called IC MEMO.

My queries would be: are all of these developments, and in particular the continual friction that occurs between 'the academy', 'the world', and 'museums', merely of parallel status and ancillary interest to university museums? Or could university museums act more audaciously to locate themselves at the intersection of some of these networks, converting energy from the debates that intensify at the points of interchange?

Museums and their publics

One of the most notable observers and interpreters of museums in recent times was Kenneth Hudson. In 1998, the year before his death, he observed:

"The most fundamental change that has affected museums during the [past] half-century [...] is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them. It was reasonably adequately financed, and its visitors, usually not numerous, came to look, to wonder and to admire what was set before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum's prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors." (HUDSON 1998: 43).

Many significant changes have occurred in the character and priorities of museums in recent decades as museums worldwide have been affected by this profound reorientation from objects to audience, or from a dispassionate display of collections to active concern with interpretation by many publics. Again, such changes have not only been driven externally, by greater fiscal and political demands for accountability imposed on museums by governments or governing bodies, nor simply by pressures for

'popularisation' emanating from a consumerist society. The changes have also been activated from within the academy, in the theoretical critiques of the substructures of Western epistemology – highlighting repetitive 'regimes' of practice that solidify mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion – as have been vigorously pursued for decades.

Such changes have included a far-reaching reappraisal of museums as not only 'custodians of collections' and cultural property borrowed or displayed, but also as 'custodians and mediators of knowledge' and forms of representation associated with collections (especially in exhibitions), according to operational systems of cultural and intellectual values. Irrespective of the content of their collections and programmes (whether scientific or cultural material), museums have been re-examined as institutions not only located in social settings³ but vitally configured by conceptions of knowledge and value shaped by social and cultural history.

Returning to Kenneth Hudson's observation in 1998, quoted above, that "The most fundamental change that has affected museums during the [past] half-century [...] is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public", it is worth pausing for a moment to ask: Where do university museums place themselves in relation to this change?

Undoubtedly, university museums are located within a particular institutional setting and structure of governance that links them to an academic campus – although many university museums are generally more accessible and used by a wider public than their own academic community alone. Undoubtedly, too, some university museums have been historically shaped by their connection to a specific community of scholars – on a particular campus, or linked up with comparable scholars internationally. And university museums, if directly affiliated to teaching

³ The International Council of Museums (ICOM) embraced a substantial change in emphasis in the early 1970s when sharp internal critique of key purposes moved the organisation to adopt the phrase 'in the service of the society and its development' in its *Statutes* and definition of museums (at ICOM's General Assembly in 1974). However competing narratives of museums' identities and roles in *cultural terms* arose more pointedly in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

departments, might well have research-based, renewable, or study collections that serve (quite effectively) more restricted purposes than a large multi-purpose museum that daily interacts with a multi-layered public. Moreover, there are many ways in which the activities of university museums (like other museums) reach a broad audience nationally or internationally that is extra-mural – for example, through websites, catalogues and publications.

However, it is worth questioning a deeply-lodged tendency of some university museums to confine their sense of audience *automatically* to an academic community, for this has a number of restrictive consequences. First, it restrains university museums' potential for wider social effect through their work – and the greater resources that may be won through broader social interest and engagement. Second, it may mean that university museums are a little shy of comparative assessments, and refrain from asking hard questions as to how they might improve what they do. A third consequence is that a limited sense of audience tends to restrain university museums from interacting with and drawing stimulus from the myriad changes taking place professionally in more publicly located, state or national museums. A number of university museums, I must affirm, have taken the front line by any international standards in innovative interpretative approaches to their collections, progressive social policies that reach out to formerly excluded communities, and development of lively programs that create productive interaction with varied audiences. Meanwhile a number maintain permanent displays that make them seem aloof to other academic communities and far behind the public interpretative standards (especially in multi-levelled communication) now expected of museums in the public sphere.

As a result of the foregoing difficulties (where it could fairly be said they do exist), university museums are susceptible to multiple schizophrenic dangers. They may seem not only disabled between their own practices and more progressive museological standards generally, but also dislocated in their actual campus setting between the professional duty

to collections and the momentum of an academic environment (continually enlisting new students) to pursue current knowledge and interests that may have little connection with collections.

My observations are offered constructively. Indeed, having been directly involved over more than a decade with the nurturing of a new national Museum of Contemporary Art in Australia (the MCA, Sydney, opened 1991) – which actually evolved out of a campus environment and permanently in-storage collection at the University of Sydney – I am familiar with the real difficulties that university museums often face in finding adequate resources for their development within a multi-purpose academic setting. However, I still argue that the question of perceived audience(s) is not to be put aside, even in addressing the great social and intellectual diversity that exists within a university community. The first context in which a university museum might consider arousing wider awareness, developing more varied public communication and programs, and capturing new audiences, might be on its own campus.

It caught my attention, for example, that audience and the public educational responsibilities of museums have, as yet, a rather slight presence in the foundational statement of UMAC's objectives, which tends to focus on relationships with university structures; preservation of collections; promotion to governing bodies, governments and cultural agencies, professions and business; provision of advice on collections; collaboration, professional exchange, exhibitions, networking; and standards, practices, training and career development. However, wider public audiences as possible beneficiaries or social participants in the work of university museums appear only once, and in the passive and 'un-embodied' form of 'the population generally'. Observing that a 'population' is not a 'public' in the sense of civil society's provisions, I suggest that some of UMAC's objectives might be cast more proactively and expansively. UMAC's 2003 annual conference (in Oklahoma, in September), being devoted to the general theme of *Engaging the Community*, provides an ideal occasion to review these issues.

Taking a broad overview: It could be advantageous to university museums to position themselves differently, taking up an axis first in the more commonly shared objectives and purposes of museums, which now revolve around educational responsibilities and public access and engagement with their resources. Of these, museums' fundamental responsibilities as educational institutions – long acknowledged as pivotal to the pursuit of their social charter – should be clearly profiled. For one thing, education in the broadest sense is what strategic analysis would call a 'core function' of universities, and the connection of university museums (especially) to this core activity needs to be clearly affirmed. For another thing, education commands in all modern societies a far higher proportion of any national and state governmental funding than cultural activities, making it a more important lever of public advocacy to turn in any mission statement for museums. It would surely be helpful for university museums – even within their own parent institutions – to refer actively to the strong public position that museums have won in the last 20 to 30 years, during which they have experienced an unprecedented increase in public profile, facilities, buildings development, technological upgrading, exhibitions and education programming, visitor support services, creation of public amenities and growth in visitor numbers.

ICOM itself (after 57 years since its foundation) is attending more proactively to its public position. It now has a short summarising Mission Statement, together with a statement of its Core Values, as worked out through a comprehensive organisational reform process that I myself had the privilege of chairing in 1999-2001⁴. The new Mission and Core Values statements of ICOM can be consulted among other official documents on ICOM's website. I therefore leave several questions posed in concluding these remarks on key objectives for UMAC:

What would be an ideal short Mission Statement for UMAC?

Whom would it serve and to whom should it ideally be communicated?

Where might the 1974 ICOM definition of museums that for the first time clearly enunciated that museums exist 'in the service of society and its development' impact on the activities of university museums?

What would an ideal operational framework statement for university museums look like, such that it could clarify and enhance their position to all their stakeholders, intra- and extra-mural, and how could this be advocated and advanced at an international level, strengthening museums everywhere?

Turning to some concepts evolving more generally in museology: How might university museums position their work in relation to recently raised concepts among museums people of distributed heritage collections; shared responsibilities for collections situated across various institutions, cultures and countries; interconnected knowledge and interpretation; and obligations undertaken increasingly willingly by museums to consult with originating communities and producers of cultural material (especially held in ethnographic collections) on behalf of expanding connections between heritage collections and society? These are just some of the matters arising as museums embrace more comprehensive concepts of cultural heritage, moving from a focus on possessions and 'ownership' to interconnecting responsibilities and 'stewardship' of the natural, scientific, and cultural heritage of humankind.

Museums today, more than ever before, need to be interdisciplinary and cross-cultural in their orientation. This is not only because of the sharp social, cultural and political challenges of today's world –

⁴ Information on the role of International Committees within ICOM, and a full list of the 28 ICs, may be found among the official documents on the ICOM Website (<http://icom.museum>). A more detailed examination of the International Committees and their relationship to the rest of ICOM may be found in the "Tool-Box Report" on ICOM: a 100+ pages document in English, French and Spanish published in May 2000 (compiled on behalf of the ICOM Reform Task Force by the present author). This lengthy report is nevertheless easy to consult in discrete sections, according to interest. It contains chapters on all parts of ICOM, its organizational divisions and operations.

and vast changes in the experimental horizons of science (for example, through the genome project) – but also because museums themselves encompass such a great variety of material within their scope. Museum collections dealing with scientific and cultural heritage range from physical to intellectual phenomena, and museums are today shifting their definitional emphases to include even ‘intangible heritage’ – which will be the theme of the triennial Conference of ICOM in Seoul, Korea, in October 2004.

Issues of representation, cultural identity and interpretation, and how these are in play in the collections, exhibitions and programmes of museums, have sharply preoccupied museological and academic forums over two decades. They were the subject of a large and significant conference entitled *The Poetics and Politics of Representation* at the Smithsonian’s International Center, Washington DC, in 1988. As anthropologist Ivan Karp, one of that conference’s organisers, maintained in introducing the significant publication that resulted, the issues were guaranteed to prove difficult and tenacious:

“Museums attempting to act responsibly in complex, multicultural environments are bound to find themselves enmeshed in controversy. [...] The multiple gazes found within and among cultures make far more complicated the great debates of the museum world [...] What is at stake in struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them, finally, is the articulation of identity. Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural ‘others’ are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and ‘other’” (KARP 1991: 5, 12, 15).

Representation – especially of things cultural – is never neutral, transparent, or unmediated. It is

always established through circumstances that contribute both vested interests and agency.

It is the total ensemble of disciplinary domains and potential encompassed by university museums that is challenging in this perspective, as well as the impact of museums generally taking on new kinds of collaborative work with extra-mural communities. Such considerations also point up why we need to comprehend museums as involving not only objects but also complex intellectual and cultural systems of knowledge.

Conclusion

Let me close by stressing the rich intellectual heritage compressed in the term *museum*, seat of the Muses: referring to the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, ‘originally goddesses of memory only, but later identified with individual arts and sciences’⁵. Harvesting the full resources of the intellectual academy – the ‘seat of the Muses’ represented today by universities – and the dense, interactive environment of the latest advances in knowledge and research cultures that they sustain, collectively provides the greatest contribution to museums at large offered by university museums. An enduring question will nevertheless be: how well are the university museums themselves managing to play a leading role in the transfer of the latest knowledge from the academy into the programmes of museums, and through the activities of museums out to a wider public?

It is understandable that a new body like UMAC would inaugurate its life with a strong sense of urgent tasks, and something of a remedial agenda, given the very real problems that university museums have faced in advancing their position and support systems on campuses where there is relentless competition for resources in an increasingly market-driven environment. However, it is crucial – at the level of both moral conviction about the importance

⁵ Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 1970. Centenary edition revised by I. H. Evans, London, Cassell: 739.

of cultural and intellectual heritage conservation on the one hand, and at the level of skilled, committed advocacy on the other – that universities establish a clear framework of their ideals, resources and professional capacities as the conceptual architecture within which all their activities are pursued. Strategically speaking: it is only after laying out a comprehensive vision of what the university museums have to offer the campuses in which they are located, the larger academic and professional communities with which they are connected, and the ideals of public service to which museums are bound, that any ‘remedial agenda’ can strongly be addressed.

In profiling the importance of the university as an intellectual laboratory for testing received knowledge, mobilising historical insight and new

critical thought, I emphasise that it is not only their collections but the total, trans-disciplinary environment of current knowledge and research that university museums have as their potential sphere of operation. These are the special resources that an International Committee of University Museums should highlight and intensify – and it is from an imaginative activation of these resources that the wider community and museums everywhere will be directly enriched.

The important opportunity offered to university museums (more readily than to many other museums) is to act in informed, nimble ways to animate the intellectual interface between the academy and society at large, to illuminate the paths of connection and possible conversations between the university and the world.

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