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Cover Story: Memos on Museum for the Next Millennium

Topic: The training and professional development of museum staff

What are the essential qualities that make a good museum professional in present day museum world?

The ideal (museum) professional is a devotee of his/hers (museum) specialization but with a strong sense of belonging to a wider whole. Are dermatologists, gynecologists or pulmonologists distinctive professions? No, they are occupations, specializations within the medical profession and exist by the arguments of medical science. So, if you accept the comparison, I would say, that talented, noble and responsible curators can exist as the result of a happy coincidence, but no job let alone a profession can be founded upon such fortuity. But talent and devotion helped by seminars, symposia and practice, create however, many good professionals. They have a broad insight into their basic academic discipline and deep interest in understanding of the world around them. Only from that can they provide the users of their museums with a needed, correct, honest product.

What are some changes compared with the past standard?

Alas, there has never been an international standard, which is both, good and bad. Generally, the changes are great and beneficial: more and more future curators receive some kind of professional training but it has to become obligatory and, - good. Our conference in Dubrovnik is part of that collective effort in learning (at least) by the best examples (www.thebestinheritage.com). However, this partly spontaneous process is not what any profession would consider as strategy for its future. The disastrous fact is that probably 80% of curators working in museums have received only their specialist academic training and no specific education for the public service they run.

What kind of young talent is most likely to shape the future of the museum?

I am afraid that the future of museums will increasingly depend upon holders of power. But we have to master as much of our mission as possible. The young, talented, scientifically well trained, educated for the heritage profession and devoted to public good might assure us some chances. Privatization, commodification and commercialization are destroying professions. I hope some countries and cultures will know how to retain public services and prevent delivering the society unconditionally to the profit predators. We need to have young curators who will finally establish a profession. Societies thrive on professions and they have been created for that. A good memory on what values humanity is founded will be the condition for survival of the mankind when casino capitalism finally pushes the world into the abyss of artificial intelligence, cyborgs and hybrid human beings. We desperately need the memory of quality, of basic values and virtues of *humanitas*. We need those with a mission, - who want the world get better, - if that does not sound obsolete in this cynical and hypocritical world. The public can learn only from those whom it loves; on the other hand, to be loved one must love first.

How museum professionals should prepare themselves for the rapidly changing future?

By understanding the world. In China, I like to believe, the choice of learning from the past is exceptional. I do not think one should become necessarily the connoisseur of Four books and Five classics but should understand the best interpretations of them. I humbly admit my fascination with Daoism and regard the Chinese relative freedom from organized religions as an immense starting capital in freedom that needs to be maintained but also filled with wisdom. I have written a lot about mnemosophy (memory understood as wisdom, superior to a mere knowledge; www.mnemosophy.com) . China has yet to discover its advantages in that. But, back to practicality, - once curators receive at least an obligatory additional year of specialist study of “science of public memory” (comprising museology as the theory of museum practice) they will understand the medium they enter and use it with conviction. Why should an excellent archaeologist be a poor curator in Archeological museum.

Topic: Museum as a public space and its role in community engagement

How should we understand the trend of moving museums from central cities to peripheries by opening branches in cities like Bilbao and Lens?

I like Bilbao, but not as the fashion or model. Lens is more logical because it is a distribution of potential of the network within the same culture. But, your question obviously implies Abu Dhabi (Louvre), Shanghai (Centre Georges Pompidou) and others too. I am rather hesitant observer of this spreading innovation. Internationalization of cultures maybe means to openness and communication, while still living our own lines of difference or likeness. In some cases, it is only a concession to the fascination with the West. This I dislike strongly. But, the world is also sliding into brutal pragmatism turning all the values into marketable goods and losing any obligation to cherish own cultural intimacy and a sense of measure. Such world is tempted to regard the potential of museums as a sensation, a marketable attraction, trading giant museum brands, or building an argument for the industry of travelling (because mass tourism is hardly more than compulsive travelling). They defend it by suggesting that this one of the good sides of globalization, but I have uneasy feeling that we are starting to legitimize, in this very sensitive issue, a false, illusionary and largely fake reality, both the present and the past one. Louvre, or Guggenheim can come to Abu Dhabi, or Centre G. Pompidou to Shanghai, in many attractive other ways.

What an ideal relation between the museum and its cities/towns look like?

By the 2050, if live to see it, half of the world’s population (some 5 billion) will live in the cities. Can there be any other function of museums in these exploding giant-conglomerations but that of guardians of identity and guarantors of cities’ uniqueness? Alas, cities tend to look just the same ugly, preposterous, aggressive megalopolises? The deep culture of cities, the real urban, cultivated and proud mentality is being erased by involution and corporative greed. The faceless, pretentious glass giants, with their pedestals and crowns clad in chaotic glittering neon grind the identity of the city into nothingness. Museums in a city are wells of self-knowledge, self-awareness, of re-assurance and inspiration for its inhabitants, a real basis of any supposed, possible democracy.

Topic: Museum Ethics

Within the current framework of museum ethics, whose voice is being listened to and whose voice is unheard?

We may lull ourselves into an illusion that museums matter, but in the power configuration, what museums propose and do is largely marginal. Giving voice to the citizens, to the community, to the identity groups is what we do, but just regard the context created by the corporate interests with the assistance of politics and the media and you will see how short we fall to all our ideal projections. Our reach is short and limited. But, as we live in post-democratic world of staged democracy, we must not reduce our contribution to the level of the mob but to the correct contrary: we need to support simple, positive civic elites, who cherish the values of the citizenry, often anchored in the (cynically) despised comfort of the disappearing middle class. They need us to help them to set the tone and support the creative elites. If a tycoon millionaire buys art like hell it is not achievement at all and it is probably not art either. The great thing is if the middle class (with its ambitious lower part and its elitist sprouts in the upper layer) buys it. If (independent) museums support it. Museums are societal promoters of equal chances which is the basis of real democracy. By providing access to the worthy collective experience, usually reserved to the rich and powerful, museums can help ordinary people in handling their (often miserable) life to a better level, but to be able to do it, we must change much and use different strategies.

Is there any prejudice and bias within the current ethical concerns in the museum field?

None, I would say. Officially and through its world organization, museums are most correct public institutions, one of the most trusted in these hard times. I see only that we finally have to go back to the museum tradition and understand that museums are innately public institutions. My students had to recite the answer to a question: Who are the natural owners of museums, without questioning: the people, the widest public. I do not think it is very obvious in our documents let alone in our behavior. Continuing this natural ideal is the free access because their natural mission is people's side of the social contract.

Topic: Museum management, the system of Board of Director at museums, an analysis of its history, development and function

Different political and economic systems have very different models of cultural policies and museum management. Any may bring but we naturally strive to know the best museum policy? How to transform the museum from, say, inert, conventional, publicly funded institution and a stately treasure trove to a versatile, engaged, partly self-sustaining social organization? I do not believe in museums as (prevalently) private endeavor. There can be private museums that meet the standards of public expectations about I would always leave it to the profession to certificate and decide. If you know that some US museums would expect an annual contribution of 10 million dollars for a place in the Board then you immediately grasp the peculiarity, or should I say monstrosity of the fact: one gets into position of decision making in an institution of public interest (or reach) because he or she is rich enough. Should we allow rich people to operate our cancer or decide how we raise our children, because they were pleased by the idea and were able to pay for the right? Awkward. Boards should be composed of the wise and noble by the spirit.

Topic: Museum and interdisciplinary cooperation

Why should museum attempt cross-sector cooperation?

In brief: because they are a job within a (nascent) profession of care and communication of public memory; so are the libraries and archives, but relevance spreads far, - to (some) private, civil, hybrid or virtual (digitally born) heritage institutions or actions. The cross-disciplinary and cross institutional cooperation is now advisable but will become part of the future solution: for the society (that needs its active, well selected and responsible memory) and for the very survival of heritage sector as reasonably autonomous societal power for incessantly negotiated social contract. Democracy is not what we are daily taught in the West: velvet dictatorship of corporative sector, politicians and media. Free elections are staged into the grotesque kermis for the increasingly ignorant, resigned and despaired mob. We need entire publicly relevant memory sector to unite and feed the strategies for best decision making, because population needs to rely upon unbiased public memory.

What new fields are museums reaching out to?

A museum is a process, not necessarily an institution and a collection even: the transfer of collective experience is happening everywhere, from Eskimo's igloos to skyscrapers and African mud shelters and it can everywhere be performed as sheer manipulation and plain stupidity as well as possess the noble quality of wisdom. The West invented museums and, lamentably, being so aggressive, conquering and preposterous, - it never allowed the others an opportunity to derive their "museums" from their own cultures. I refuse to believe that so many differences in understanding of what past, culture, identity, heritage would necessarily lead to the same institutional solution, i.e. the Western museum. I still believe that China can profile some sort of own or self-adjusted response to the need for the human advance. It should stop measuring its success by the statistic comparisons and likeness to the West. I believe that you do not need to follow the same logic.

Topic: Museum Education

What does the increasingly large number of publicly available data mean for the future of museum?

Topic: Museum and Cultural Relics

Cultural artifacts circulate amongst private collectors, auction houses, museums, states, and illegal markets. For an object of cultural significance, what does an ideal destination look like?

The ideal destination is the place of its origin and existence, the context of its users or their descendants and inheritors, who only can recognize values of it that they may wish to cherish, support, care for and see as worth continuing in some way. Heritage should be kept as much as possible outside the commercial and political sphere where it is misused and manipulated. But, since it is so potent and important it is an object of assaults of all sorts. When English destroyed the Emperor's palace in 1860 they were hilarious about it. A dog from the palace was presented to the Queen Victoria and she named it Looty. Museums themselves have a history to be told.

When dealing with cultural heritage, where is the fine line between protection and overprotection, and between a thorough examination and exploitation?

Being a profession in making, we are like a dismembered army fighting a battle with giants. So scattered and in plain withdrawal we can hardly think of exaggerating in protection of the heritage that we have extracted from the past and which we intend to care for and maintain for the present and future users. We are losing ground daily.

What standards are used to evaluate the heritage, conservation and museum projects in the Best in Heritage conference? What is its impact?

“Best practice” is generic and general term and it implies that anybody using it obliges herself/himself with the task of defining the criteria of quality. For the last 16 years we know that we can rely upon considerable effort of dozens of juries from all over the world that are trying to elaborate them. I think that the **public quality** part of general concern with quality is what finally decides upon all other criteria. Shortest: if you know why and for whom you work, you will arrive to learning to know how. We do not evaluate our impact but we do best to inspire and encourage public devotion and innovation. Our conference is a year round experience because all presentations are put for free access at our web site. An excellent resource for professional education.

What are some recent changes and trends in the heritage care and communication?

Excess of private museums, which mainly means that private collectors do not see the need any more to immortalize themselves through difficult negotiation with curators. They have their own curators the way they like them. This fall in rating is a bad news for us.

Popping up of small private and civil initiatives which is a sign that our system lacks the capillary deepness and ability to reach deep into the layers of society. But, we are finally in the time continuum: there will be no more separate layers of time divided into the past, present and future. Much is happening and the best I can do to address the big issue is to revert the reader to one of my brief texts:

https://www.academia.edu/19866870/Some_trends_and_tendencies_in_public_memory_domain)

Topic: The Standard for Museum Assessment

Whose standard are we using today to evaluate a museum?

I know that many Universities and some museum or heritage associations are trying to devise evaluation criteria. All conferences touch the theme in some way. There is some literature upon it but we still have a way to go. I have tried the criticism of museum sins (see the book “Eternity does not live here anymore”, accessible at: <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>) to imply or claim explicitly what would be correct instead.

What is the impact and consequence of the evaluation system?

Those who have criteria know what the quality is about and are able to describe, propose and promote their product. To illustrate it I will leave you with a proposal: try to find a usable literature on “museum product”, and you will learn that majority of us is still not ready to face the challenge of the society in peril. Our products are ill defined and most of our successes are still measured in numbers of visitors. The ways of quality and wisdom are different.