

International activity

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Abstract

In conducting international activities, museums rely on external networks of collaboration and exchange. Increasingly, the remit of museums extends beyond national boundaries, and links into wider cultural, environmental, social and economic agendas which are shared with the global community. The context of globalisation has reinforced the position of museums in recent years, assigning to us a growing role within increasingly diverse and multi-cultural societies at home and abroad. This paper will look at some aspects of globalisation which have had a particular impact on the international museum community and considers the main forms of international museum activity within four areas: preserving a global heritage, research and scholarship, dialogue with global audiences, sharing skills and building capacity.

Many museums, and all sizeable ones, preserve, interpret and present major cultural and natural assets from around the world - by definition they are international in scope, and some occupy a pre-eminent position internationally in their respective fields. This reflects our expertise and skills base, sometimes the historical origins of our collections, and often our day-to-day exposure to an international public.

In conducting international activities, museums rely on external networks of collaboration and exchange. Increasingly, the remit of our greater museums, especially in the USA and Britain, where there are such numbers of museums of scale and quality, extends beyond national boundaries, and links into wider cultural, environmental, social and economic agendas which are shared with the global community - the protection of the world's natural and cultural riches, for example, or dialogue between nations and cultures. Many museums are engaged in various forms of cultural diplomacy, which endure even in times of tension, or conflict.

The context of globalisation has reinforced the position of museums in recent years, assigning to us a growing role within increasingly diverse and multi-cultural societies at home and abroad. Our greater museums offer major benefits in educational terms by providing comparison and contextualisation of world cultures, past and present.

There are changing demands and expectations associated with an expanding international remit, and there is a need to assert the notion of global reach and responsibility. The dialogue of our greater museums in our cities is now with audiences from all over the world, through exhibitions, publications and the web. I would argue that the international dimension is anchored in the evolving role of museums in modern society, and that the exposure to the rest of the world of our pre-eminent museums has been greatly heightened by globalisation.

There are some aspects of globalisation which have had a particular impact on the international museum community. These include:

1. the growth of multi-cultural societies -

globalisation (and by this I mean the lowering of international barriers to trade, travel and employment, and the flow of information, ideas, fashions, customs and values, as well as the speeding up of these through technology) has accelerated the mobility of people, leading to increasingly heterogeneous populations across the globe, and especially in the large Western cities.

We have seen the formation of large diasporas, exposing migrant and local populations to different cultures. The pace of these developments is unprecedented, leading to fundamental questioning of individual and collective identity. The growing interest in museums can in part be attributed to this, because as repositories of material culture, museums are part of the process of assertion and assimilation of culture and traditions.

2. the impact of communication technology -

there are numerous opportunities for museums brought about by the revolution in information technology.

They are now able to

- engage with remote audiences
- unite, virtually, dispersed collections
- facilitate international dialogue
- involve the public in research and collecting etc.

3. the convergence of professional standards -

we now routinely benchmark against international practice, we have seen the application of management services, the growth of professional literature. There is more global competition for talent. For

museums especially we have seen the rise of museum management studies, of literature, of the internationalisation of museum staff.

International museum collaboration usually takes place either within a particular field of expertise - such as conservation and historic links - such as those between the USA and the UK. Beyond this, we could consider the main forms of international museum activity within four areas:

1. *preserving a global heritage*: museums worldwide are bound by a common concern for the preservation of collections, and this includes specimens and species as well as objects. Museums form part of a wider community concerned with the protection and preservation of the world's cultural and natural heritage.

So, we are involved in the development of conservation standards and techniques as well as the creation of strategies to address the threats to cultural and natural assets worldwide. We find ourselves, as an international community, reacting to climate change, atmospheric pollution, wars in which we see cultural devastation, the destruction of customs, skills and knowledge - recent examples include Afghanistan, Croatia and Iraq. We see tourism threatening historic fabrics and environments. We see illicit trade, looting, illicit excavation, theft of cultural artefacts.

2. *research and scholarship*: research knows no international boundaries, and museums excel in collections-based research.

Museums sustain levels of expertise and knowledge which can be found nowhere else. We find that some of the strongest international links have been forged through research activity, and that benefit flows in all directions. Research can be related to publications and exhibitions, provenance, new technology, fieldwork, museology itself.

3. *dialogue with global audiences*: the growth of global tourism is a massive phenomenon which is shrinking the world rapidly. Much of this is culturally based. Dialogue among cultures becomes ever more complex and meaningful as audiences become more global and diverse. The challenges for museums in attempting to address these audiences also grow.

These factors influence exhibition, interpretation, education, and can do so profoundly. Building dialogues with global audiences involves exhibitions relating to diverse cultures, international lending - and issues of standards, security, conservation, transport etc. - and virtual or digital access.

4. *sharing skills and building capacity*: here we encounter professional networking, publication, training courses, benchmarking, design etc. It is in this area that INTERCOM itself can play a vital role. We need to ensure that we pursue skills exchanges through web contact, publication and international meetings such as this one - this is where I believe the true value of ICOM's international committees can be realised.

As to what characteristics could be said to be shared by museums internationally, I will restrict my comments to suggesting that what they have in common is that they are all coping with CHANGE. Museums operate in a fast-changing world, and standing still is not an option.

What is remarkable is the commonality of the experience of change: all the challenges faced by European museums are faced by museums all over the world - commercial pressures, competition, lack of public funding, the need to fundraise, tensions between preservation and scholarship on one hand, and access on the other; pressures in collecting, in exhibiting, in keeping pace with

technology, marketing and advocacy, education, and possibly most important of all, social change.

Worldwide, museums are struggling with visions, structures, politics, the media, training and development, risk taking, fear of failure, financial management. Only the degree of intensity varies. We may think some of us struggle for survival in Europe, but we must spare a thought for our colleagues in Cambodia, or Nepal, Ghana, or even Russia.

Developing International Networks

I want to end this rapid survey of international challenges by stressing the potential for museums to become ever more extensively networked. We have resources and skills in some museums which we must share with others. My own belief is that it is a moral, ethical and professional responsibility for us and museums in the wealthy developed world to work with colleagues elsewhere. Moreover, governments are becoming increasingly interested in the potential of such networks.

My own museum service, National Museums Liverpool, sees it as a prime responsibility to take an international lead, for example in developing museum studies and practice as related to the transatlantic slave trade, which changed the world forever between the 16th and 19th centuries.

Liverpool was the capital of this trade by the time of its abolition by Britain in 1807, and the city's economy was heavily reliant upon the trade during the 18th century. Today, Britain's economy remains strong, and our museums are relatively well resourced. By contrast, the museums in many countries most affected by the slave trade, such as in West Africa or the Caribbean, are starved of resources, reflecting the condition of their national economies. I believe it to be a responsibility of Liverpool's museums to support our colleagues in these countries,

with whom we have a shared history, in their educational work relating to the slave trade, which has left so many legacies in all the countries involved.

We believe, in fact, that only through an international perspective can museums in any of the countries involved in the slave trade, whether they have developed economies or not, really understand the trade and its consequences. The museum will look at the deep and permanent impact of the transatlantic slave trade on Africa, South America, the USA, the Caribbean and western Europe, so the possibilities for international collaboration are wide ranging.

An example of international collaborative work is National Museums Liverpool's Make the Link, Break the Chain school twinning project, which we are running as part of the celebrations of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. The aim is to involve children from different affected countries in a cross-arts media project that will encourage them to talk to each other, and to examine critically the concept and legacy of the slave trade. Young people from Liverpool, Brazil, Haiti, Senegal and Sierra Leone are involved. The final outcome of the project will be an international Children's Charter on how we preserve liberty today.

In another project, staff from National Museums Liverpool are working with colleagues from the Ho Chi Min Museum in Hanoi to improve learning programmes in both institutions. Such a collaboration would once have been unthinkable, but it shows how museums in different countries can help break down barriers and counter prejudice and misunderstanding.

I want to stress that it is possible to interest politicians in collaborative work between museums in different countries because of the potential diplomatic value of such work. For example, the British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the President of

Ghana John Kulfour, have all taken an interest in Liverpool's project to create an International Slavery Museum (which opens in August 2007) precisely because of its potential to bring about international collaboration and understanding of our shared histories. And as we all are aware, political interest often can be translated in financial support, and not only from politicians!

In Britain, museums are now becoming far more internationally-minded than ever before, not least because Government encourages us to do so far more overtly than previously. An example is the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) South Africa Curator Scheme, wherein placements

with British museums are made available to curators from South Africa, the aim being to foster sustainable links between museums which promote collaboration and the sharing of good practice. There is a desire by the British Government to improve the country's image, reputation and relationships abroad, and museums are seen as important components in this.

It seems to me that international activity is going to become more and more important for museums, and we should all be thinking about the many possibilities that are opening up to us. Such activity, I believe, will come to be seen as of fundamental importance for museums all over the world.

About the author

Dr. David Fleming has been Director of National Museums Liverpool (NML) since 2001, having previously been Director of Tyne & Wear Museums for 11 years. Before that he worked in museums in York, Leeds and Hull. NML is made up of 8 national museums and galleries.

Dr. Fleming is currently a Trustee of St George's Hall and Bluecoat Arts Centre, and sits on a number of other Boards and governing bodies, such as the Mersey Tourism Board and the Liverpool World Heritage Site Steering Group. He is President of INTERCOM (the International Committee on Museum Management), Chair of the National Museum Director's Conference UK Affairs Committee, a member of NMDC's Executive Committee, a member of ICOM's Finance and Resources Committee, a member of the UK National Commission for UNESCO's Culture Committee, and is an examiner for distance learning in Museum Studies at Leicester University.

He is a past President of the UK Museums Association, past Trustee of both the National Museum of Labour History and the National Football Museum, and has served on several Government committees and Task Forces. At present David is serving on a committee advising the UK's Deputy Prime Minister on the 2007 celebrations to commemorate the abolition of the British slave trade, is advising the Dutch Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science on a national strategy for museums, and is advising the UK Government on a national strategy for museums.

Dr. Fleming is currently supervising the creation of two new British national museums - the International Slavery Museum and the £65million Museum of Liverpool. His main work interests revolve around museum management, audience development and social inclusion. He is a strong believer in the museum as an agent of social change. He was awarded an OBE by HM The Queen in the 1996 New Years Honours List for services to museums.