

The Voice of the Other: Breaking with Museum Tradition¹

La voz del otro: rompiendo con la tradición del museo

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ABSTRACT

There is an attitude prevalent in the museum world that diverse cultures are adequately presented and respected and that there is an effective dialogue between museums and the cultural communities they serve. This paper, however, does not concur with this, explores the reason why, and suggests a course whereby museums can successfully come closer to such goals.

What is involved here is the historical and contemporary ethos of museums and their concept of self, which interferes with their ability to be inclusive of "the other" except on their own terms. The museum's purpose in this regard is to maintain its authoritative voice and intellectual prerogative in its communications with the publics it serves. The thought that there are multiple voices that need to be heard is not an easy concept for museums to contemplate and a positive move in that direction would represent a major shift with far-reaching consequences.

KEY WORDS: *The other. Voice. The self. Authority. Partnership.*

RESUMEN

Existe una actitud predominante en el mundo de los museos según la cual las diversas culturas se presentan y se respetan de manera adecuada, dándose un diálogo efectivo entre los museos y las comunidades culturales a las que sirven. Sin embargo, el presente trabajo disiente de dicha creencia, expone sus motivos, y sugiere una trayectoria por la que los museos pueden acercarse con éxito a tales objetivos.

Lo que está en juego aquí es el ethos contemporáneo e histórico de los museos y su concepto de la identidad propia, lo que interfiere con su capacidad para incluir a "los otros", excepto en sus propios términos. El propósito del museo en este sentido es mantener su voz preeminente y su prerrogativa intelectual en sus comunicaciones con el público al que sirve. La idea de que hay múltiples voces que necesitan ser escuchadas no es un concepto fácil de contemplar para los museos, y un paso positivo en aquella dirección representaría un cambio importante con consecuencias de largo alcance.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *El otro. Voz. El yo. Autoridad. Asociación.*

Museums are originally a construct of “Western” or European based societies, wherever they can be located in the world. European countries in particular have built museums to house objects acquired in trade with or looted from cultures they have encountered during exploration, conquest, or imperialistic war. Objects taken through illicit actions have also found their way into museum collections. On the other hand, there are museums which have focused on collecting objects from their own predominant culture or cultures or from those where there are resident indigenous and minority populations. For Western museums, holding eclectic cross-cultural collections is very often a natural part of their institutional circumstance. More recently, museum institutions outside of this demographic have developed and have become inherent additives to the cultural and social landscapes in which they are located. The word “museum” has found its way into the lexicon of most languages except for those where it (the museum) is still an unknown. Each museum has naturally taken the form and espouses the beliefs of the dominant cultural milieu in which it is located. Incorporating different cultures into either the philosophy or operation of the museum and its activities, let alone fostering intercultural exchanges, is not an easy task and some museums shy away from doing so altogether.

As peoples move more freely throughout the world and immigration is a continually growing reality, especially for Western countries, new cultural values which infiltrate the sphere of the predominant societal dynamic are slowly beginning to be acknowledged in a visible way by museum institutions. The forms of acknowledgement employed by museums normally range from the acquisition of objects, to their exhibition, and to educational programming at both the school and adult level. The issue here is that these activities nearly always go in one direction, originating from the museum and “delivered” to the public it serves. There is, however, an inherent problem with this type of unidirectional “delivery”.

1. The Problem

Simply stated, the root of the problem stems from the formation of the museum organization itself and its ongoing traditional methods of operation. The museum has fundamentally become a mirror of the societal values of the predominant culture in which it is located. The primary deci-

sion makers in the museum structure -directors, curators, educators/programmers, exhibition designers, conservators- are normally recruited from this demographic. Each is accomplished in a field of study acquired from a university, technical, art school, or other such institution, and each brings learned skills with him/her to the job. Since the museum ethos and methodology subscribe to Western standards, cultural attributes, which might differ from the norm, rarely enter into the equation. By and large, the museum is comfortable in this position and sees little reason to change the status quo.

There are, however, segments of the public, in particular those of aboriginal origin and to an increasing extent, those from the immigrant minorities, which have been questioning the way they are being portrayed by museums and in some cases, why they are not being represented at all. This has led not only to a desire, but also to demands for a role in the museum’s acquisition, collections management, information production and dissemination, and other activities. For some museums, this has escalated to the point that the inclusion of such demands be evident both in intent and in written museum policies. While many museums are prepared to acknowledge intent (often appearing, however vaguely, in Mission Statements), only too few are prepared to cast it into their policy documents.

Museums are still organized as the sole generators and thereby in control of the didactic materials disseminated to their audience, primarily by way of exhibitions. Curators are hired who have the learned knowledge about the collections under their care and it is expected that it is the curator’s responsibility to research and present the collections through exhibition in a “meaningful” way for the general education and interest of the visitor. These collections are comprised of objects which are static, having been removed from their “active” *in situ* environment and subjected to the process of musealization. Through this process, they are ascribed with new identities to suit the museum’s purpose, however that may be defined at any one time. As such purposes change, so do the identities given to the objects. The objects, as sources of knowledge, exist in this way to serve the museum’s intent. Throughout time, objects are imbued with many different attributes so far removed from their original function, thus enabling the creation of illusory cultural contexts which are made available to the museum visitor.

This methodology is museum based, museum directed, and museum delivered. While curators think they are being conscientious by striving for authenticity and balance, they do not realize that even with what they believe to be respectful intentions, the cultural illusions they create are just the opposite. While objects remain as real, tangible testaments of the cultures from which they originated and as such must be preserved, they are no longer “alive” within their original cultural milieu and have become just remnants or examples of what once was. As such, they are open for re-contextualization, manipulation, and interpretive “abuse”. They are moulded to fit an exhibition concept or storyline and their inclusion is justified in terms of their interpretive value. Juxtaposed with other objects, their cultural identities and functional relationships can be entirely lost. Since the museum’s primary interface with its public is in its exhibition gallery, this museum function serves as its theatrical stage, with entrances and exits, delineated scenes and acts, designed backdrops and sets, costuming, and attractive embellishments. Above all, the exhibition has the ability to create illusion and this it conveys ostensibly for the education and enjoyment of museum audiences.

Are these illusions truly educative or just mere facades? While the accepted standard is to provide didactic materials through such manipulative interpretations, the question remains why minorities query the way they are represented in museums. This has led such groups to call for a place in museum policies, for a share in museum activities, and in particular, for a voice in the interpretation of their own cultures. It is this call that museums need to heed to move them, however slowly, off of the concept of their sole authoritative position towards one that is more inclusive.

Yet, this will not be an easy transition for museums to contemplate in spite of the fact that their actions have triggered a number of conflicts where the authority of these cultural institutions and their personnel has been severely contested. Probably the most prominent examples illustrative of this in Canada involved the presentation of two exhibitions.

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: 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: 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: 161) (Ames 2004: 88). 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: 49), with Shell Oil being seen as “responsible for the destruction of their [the Lubicon First Nations] lifestyle” (Dibbelt 1988).

This flashpoint was immediately followed by a massive letter writing campaign which initiated the boycott and 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: 6). The exhibition also “came under intense criticism for exhibiting indigenous heritage as art rather than exposing the colonial underpinnings still governing relationships between Native people and Canadian Institutions” (Cruikshank 1992: 6). In the end, *The Spirit Sings* was described as “an unqualified success” (Steward 2008), even though 12 of the 110 institutions world-wide originally contacted by the Glenbow supported the Lubicon’s boycott by not lending their artifacts to the exhibition (Harrison 1988: 6) (Steward 2008), and at least one temporary injunction was brought by the Kahnawake Mohawk for the removal of a sacred object, a mask, from the exhibition (Phillips 2011: 54) (Dibbelt 1988). The Lubicon’s hoped-for general boycott of the Olympics was not successful, and their long-standing grievances have yet to be fully resolved.

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 photograph, along with its original caption, “Lord Beresford’s Encounter with a Zulu” is described as the “most controversial image of the exhibit” (Butler 2011: 30). The image is from the front cover of *The London Illustrated News*, Saturday, September 6, 1879, and shows 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: 30).

By March 1990, the museum was being picketed by the Coalition for the Truth about Africa (CFTA) 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, fueled 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: 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: 122). All four institutions (two Canadian and two American) scheduled to receive the exhibition when it closed in Toronto, quickly cancelled their bookings. The Vancouver Museum (now, Museum of Vancouver) led the way in this, being the first to cancel after realizing that, following several meetings held at the initiative of the museum, members of the local African-Canadian community did not respond to the museum’s invitation to mount, in the Museum itself, their own response to the Royal Ontario Museum’s presentation. Immediately after the Vancouver Museum cancelled its booking with the Royal Ontario Museum, contracts with the other three scheduled venues (Canadian Museum of Civilization, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, and Albuquerque Museum of Natural History) fell like a “house of cards”. In the end, 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).

In the case of *Into the Heart of Africa*, the question to be asked is how did this go so terribly wrong? While the exhibition was intended to be provocative, Schildkrout questions “whether either the ROM [Royal Ontario Museum] or the curator was certain whom it was intended to provoke.” and added that although “the organizers obviously thought that *Into the Heart of Africa* would be seen as a critical portrait of colonial collecting and museum ethics, the exhibition was seen by many people as a glorification of colonialism” (Schildkrout 1991: 16). Thus, as a consequence, “the subtlety of the message and the absence of a clear coalition with Africans in Toronto” (Cruikshank 1992: 6) is precisely what lay at the root whereby the exhibition was labeled as being racist.

Upon examination, the catalyst that triggered the chains of events targeting both *The Spirit Sings* and *Into the Heart of Africa*, was (and still is) the inherent attitude extant in museums: they possess the authoritative voice; they have the right to interpret the collections with whatever intellectual prerogative they so choose; and, they deliver the message in a unidirectional fashion. While this is similar to what happens in the classroom, there is one defining difference: students can ask questions of and enter into a debate with the teacher or professor. This privilege is not afforded the museum visitor who is handed the message in a take it or leave it fashion depending solely on his/her level of interest. Little or no attempt is made to engage the visitor, whose presence in the “sanctum” is perceived by the museum as a natural corollary to the institution being what it is. As such, the museum is seen as disassociated from the community and this state becomes more evident, and ultimately more critical, in the case where aboriginal and other minority groups are concerned.

2. The Approach

What can museums do to mitigate these problems? Is there an approach or a course of action which museums can take to present cultures and peoples, from both aboriginal and minority segments of society, in a way that does not cause offense?

The first corrective measure is a realignment of and reaffirmation in museum philosophy that its primary role is one of “steward”, not of owner, coveting and hoarding all that is in its care,

and that it functions in the service of society as a whole, at all levels and with all peoples. Museums exist not only to preserve, research, and present the collections under its stewardship, but also to serve all of the various publics in its community. This sense of service needs to come from a policy driven commitment and museum actions need to evolve from such a stated obligation. This may seem obvious and there may be a belief inherent in the museum ethos that they are doing well in this department, but this is not normally the case. While “lip service” should no longer be acceptable, it is still pervasive. In addition, a conscientious effort needs to be made to break down those barriers which have marked years and years of institutional self-superiority. Museums are one with the community, regardless of that community’s cultural composition, and they should be a primary vehicle through which minorities communicate their histories and life-ways to others.

Many museums, however, have developed projects (exhibitions, programmes, etc.) which have begun to reach out to their publics. With project in hand, they are communicating directly with various communities by seeking to consult with contacts within or with designated representatives from the specific cultural group or groups on which the enterprise focuses. This consultation, however, normally takes place after the museum has drafted the conceptual framework of the project and developed it to the point where it feels that such discussions would be appropriate or useful. Again, this position serves to demonstrate a presumption on the part of the museum that the authoritative role devolves to itself. This does not mean that such consultation is wrong, but it does represent the extent to which most museums are prepared to go and, at this point, not much beyond.

There is far more museums can do to achieve a meaningful dialogue with its multicultural communities. This would involve a series of major changes for the museum: from inward to outward looking, from exclusive to inclusive, from paternalistic to respectful, from independent to sharing, from reactive to proactive, from single to multiple voices and perspectives, and all the corresponding consequences that would eventuate. Such a major attitudinal shift would constitute a complete re-evaluation and re-alignment of institutional values. It requires a fully committed, policy-driven effort by the museum to effect the necessary results.

The step from consultation (seeking knowledge for fundamentally unidirectional purposes)

to collaboration (where roles are shared) is one of the key changes in this process. Museums are reluctant to relinquish or even share the power and authority which they feel is rightly theirs. The fact remains that in order to achieve a level of meaningful dialogue, museums must enter into genuine relationships with those groups whose cultures they wish to disseminate to their visitors. Basic to this is the building and nurturing of such fundamental attributes as trust and respect, and only from the springboard of such a foundation can collaboration take flight and produce valued results. While not all cultural groups have the same requirements, the attitude prevalent in museums must be prepared to be flexible, responsive, and above all, willing to adjust to the demands from its public. In the end, the museum must be publically accountable and socially responsible.

Museums operating in close proximity to or, in some cases, actually situated on the traditional lands of aboriginal peoples, are becoming acutely aware of what it means to be inclusive. Centuries of marginal existence and social disenfranchisement have led these peoples to level severe criticism towards museums and their methods of portraying aboriginal histories and cultures. From this criticism has grown a fervent demand for a voice in the museum and this cry is having to be heeded, albeit with varying degrees of reluctance. To fully embrace aboriginal demands would be to enter into an equal partnership (not just a more simple collaboration) with the aboriginal group in question, one governed, as it is on the west coast of Canada for example, by protocol agreements which lay out the terms by which the parties work together. Since such partnership arrangements would eventually afford aboriginal peoples physical and operational access to the museum, it is important for museums to take a proactive role to eliminate any opportunity for inter-cultural divisiveness.

Such a partnership would ultimately require that both parties are jointly involved in nearly every aspect of the museum, from its architecture, to its acquisitions, loans and repatriation policies and procedures, to collections management processes, to the selection of exhibition topics, to the way aboriginal histories and cultures are interpreted, to the delivery of school programmes, to communication with the media and the public at large, and to its governance and management, including the hiring of staff from minority cultures. No longer are aboriginal peoples satisfied with

being involved after decisions are made by the museum. For example, exhibition topics involving or incorporating their histories and culture are to be decided jointly and aboriginal peoples are to curate or, at the very least, co-curate exhibitions and then to prepare and deliver relevant programmes to students and the public. Under a partnership agreement, anything dealing with the interpretation and dissemination of aboriginal histories and cultures would be the prerogative of the aboriginal peoples in question. Museums are being put in a position beyond inclusiveness to that where it virtually relinquishes decision-making powers to aboriginal groups from which they hold collections when such are being used. Perhaps this is a corollary of colonialism or the fallout from centuries of subjugation, but aboriginal resurgence has arrived and is here to stay. "Political correctness" is all the rage and museums holding collections of aboriginal provenance dare not be seen as insensitive and uncompromising.

Under such conditions, whether it be a collaboration or a more "invasive" partnership, the roles of museum staff could not help but change. Staff would no longer work in the protective "ivory tower" isolation behind institutional walls, unseen and removed from society. They now would become facilitators rather than producers; they would serve as intermediaries, bringing peoples together for a common cause. In this way, museums would become listeners to aboriginal and minority communities, and builders of bridges that connect peoples. In this reality, a new way of approaching day to day museum operations would need to be embraced. Timelines and schedules would become open-ended and expectations realigned accordingly. The museum would take a back seat to those communities vying for room in a place, the museum, where its "message" can be made public. At the same time, the museum would need to be adroit enough to avoid being caught in any political cross-fire which may arise between conflicting minority groups.

Museum personnel can no longer look on their holdings as their own property but need to see themselves as stewards of a heritage that does not belong to them. They need to realize that they have become over-dependant on other peoples materials and that this form of cultural appropriation has become unwelcome. They need to shed the image that museums "construct the "other" to construct and justify the "self" (Marstine 2010: 14). They must learn to recognize that there are different methods of presenting histories that

are non-linear and cultural lifeways that diverge remarkably from the current museum standard. They must also work to eradicate the public's misconception that indigenous peoples and cultures are "dead" and only exist in the past with no thought being given to the cultural continuum into the present and beyond. While curators are perfectly capable of intellectualizing and objectifying their exhibition presentations by arranging inanimate objects in a Western fashion, there are perspectives of great value that originate with indigenous and minority populations that bring the added dimension of a "living" knowledge base which the museum cannot replicate. Like the Balinese concept of *taksu* or inner power which dancers request with offerings to and receive from their God before their performances. Foreigners who learn Balinese dance and are technically proficient, cannot achieve *taksu* and as such appear merely as automatons, devoid of the power which achieves a culturally animated and infused performance (Maranda 2009).

This does not mean that there are no museums which have taken or are taking the necessary steps to address this growing reality, but these are few and far between. There are a number of reasons that this is so, many of which relate to the museum's ingrained image of self, and others which focus on a variety of factors, one of which is definitely financial. In Canada, in 1992, the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association travelled along this path by producing a Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples entitled, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. In fact, the impetus for "bringing Aboriginal peoples and museums together in a series of national discussions" (Task Force on Museums and First Peoples 1992: 1) was the Lubicon Lake First Nation's boycott of *The Spirit Sings* exhibition. The Report lists principles and makes specific recommendations for the establishment of partnerships between museums and Aboriginal 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 (Task Force on Museums and First Peoples 1992: 7-10). The establishment of such a partnership through the implementation of the recommendations, would give full and equal voice to Aboriginal peoples. Nevertheless, the proposals "have no legal status and are not bind-

ing, and there has been no systematic follow-up to determine the extent to which museums have implemented these recommendations” (Janes 2009: 51). While the Report also recognizes that significant funding, human resources and time will be required to implement changes, in the intervening years, 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.

This is not to say that when steps are taken to deal with the issue, that everything will run smoothly. The *Te Maori* exhibition, which the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York organized in 1984, has been described as a “watershed in terms of bicultural museum practice within this country [New Zealand]” (Anonymous n.d.) as it marked the first time the New Zealand Maori peoples were actively involved not only in the process of their works leaving their country, but also in the planning, display and interpretation of *taonga*, treasured Maori objects. In addition, Maori accompanied the exhibition on its American tour as caretakers and were trained as gallery guides. It is interesting to note that the *taonga* were presented not as ethnological objects, as defined by museum and Western scholarship, but rather as works of art. Nevertheless, “Tensions rose especially over the ethnological and historical background provided in the exhibition catalogue, which the Maori elders considered pure nonsense” (Lavine & Karp 1991: 2).

The transition from an independent, self-serving institution in society, to a museum that is an

open and inclusive resident of the community, will not be an easy process. It cannot nor does not happen over night. Each cultural community, whether aboriginal or immigrant minority, will define the parameters and methodology of its interaction with the museum according to its own precepts. Things will progress at an entirely unfamiliar pace and there will be a need for museums to exercise incredible patience and flexibility. Museums will no longer be in a position to set deadlines and demand deliverables in accordance with any predetermined schedule. In light of contested representations, museums will need to find new ways of balancing free speech, originating from the voice of “the others”, with scholarly interests, even to the extent that two parallel scenarios are contemplated. Cultures can no longer be “invented”. Museum ethos will need to undergo a fundamental attitudinal shift from “keep out” to “come in” and from “have to?” to “want to!”.

The voices of “the other”, currently almost entirely represented by indigenous and minority cultures, are continually knocking on the museum’s door and will eventually have to be heard. To achieve this, museums will need to effect a harsh and wrenching break from their traditional roles as collections owner, as sole authority, as intellectual purveyor. They will need to be prepared to assume a position of steward, of facilitator, of intermediary. Unless museums make progress towards this end, they will continue to lose their relevance to and dwindling respect in the rapidly growing multi-cultural societies of the 21st century. Further, they run the risk of being labeled as one of the problems peoples from indigenous and minority cultures face, rather than one of the solutions in its hoped for role as societal advocate.

NOTES

1. Much of the information contained in this paper is from the author’s personal first-hand knowledge and communications garnered over 44 years as a museum professional (anthropology curator).

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