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Museums, Human Rights, Contested Histories and Excluded Communities

by David Fleming

David Fleming became Director of National Museums Liverpool in 2001. Since his arrival he has supervised the completion of several major capital projects, including the ‘Into The Future’ project, which included major refurbishment of the Walker Art Gallery and World Museum, the opening of the International Slavery Museum, and the creation and opening of the Museum of Liverpool. Before arriving in Liverpool, David Fleming was Director of the Tyne and Wear Museums for 11 years. Prior to that he was principal keeper at Hull Museums, where his major projects included a new Transport Museum and The Old Grammar School. He started his museum career as founder-curator of the Yorkshire Museum of Farming, York. David Fleming is President of the UK Museums Association and has served on several Government committees and task forces. He was awarded an OBE in the 1997 New Years Honours List for services to museum, lectures worldwide on museum practice, and is an active member of ICOM.

Museums have always been aware of their role as custodians of the evidence of people’s identity. In the past, this awareness was often limited to the identification, collection and protection of material culture; and what grew up around this role was the notion and practice of curatorship. In turn, curatorship became synonymous with expertise and knowledge; the problem was that this knowledge could often be seen as exclusive. Curators were at risk of appearing to resemble a priesthood, jealously guarding access to material culture, enjoying the admiration of peers but becoming detached from the general public that most museums were set up to serve—the very people whose identity was being protected (see Weil 2002).

Arguments that museums should be more inclusive were often met by accusations of oversimplifying. The suggestion was that popularisation would inevitably mean loss of scholarship and quality. This response betrayed two attitudes. First, it betrayed an ignorance of the fact that museums rarely collected and therefore rarely preserved evidence of most people’s everyday lives; second, it betrayed an arrogance about whom museums are for. They are not for an elite to enjoy—they are democratic institutions that ought to be for everyone.

In many nations this latter point began to come into focus as a result of questions being asked about who was paying for our museums, and what benefit they provide, and to whom. In
the UK this happened in the 1980s, when ‘value for money’ became a political quest. The trouble was that value for money analyses were driven largely by a desire to spend less public money, not always by a desire to see a democratisation of elitist institutions. So museums found themselves under hostile scrutiny by politicians of all persuasions—by those who simply wanted museums to cost less, but also by those who wanted museums to be of greater value to more people. In a number of ways, such scrutiny, with all its attendant tensions, pulling museums in several directions at once, has been with museums ever since.

One of the more remarkable trends in modern museum thinking, about their role and their approaches to ethics, is the growing interest in the analysis and promotion of human rights. This has come about for a variety of reasons. The notion of intangible heritage has come to prominence; museums are not solely about the physical detritus of society and nature—they are also about beliefs, customs, languages. Moreover, the notion of the curator/priest has come under attack for several reasons: because this risks leading to museums that are irrelevant to most people, most of the time; because it is now more widely understood that people themselves, not just objects, are repositories of evidence; because it is now accepted widely that public involvement enriches museum content; because the falsehood of faux neutrality, of the museum devoid of opinion and bias, has been exposed.

The modern curator will be skilled in liaising with the public, not just with colleagues and textbooks. He/she understands that sometimes the most effective curators are by the public, not by the professional. He/she will seek broad audiences, and will seek to make displays that are emotional, rather than dispassionate. These are requirements that are additional to the need to have knowledge about collections and academic disciplines; they are not a substitute.

And so, we have museums that behave differently from their forbears; that try to achieve different things that are more likely to involve themselves in controversy, in disputes, in campaigns, in politics—because museums exist in real time and in real life, not just in academe.

There are three key Declarations by members of ICOM’s International Committee for Museum Management (INTERCOM) that indicate this direction of travel. In 2009 in the Mexican city of Torreon, INTERCOM members made this Declaration:

INTERCOM believes that it is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and background (see INTERCOM online).

Four years later, in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro, a joint Declaration was made by INTERCOM and the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) members:

INTERCOM and FIHRM reject all forms of intolerance and discrimination and call upon governments in all nations to respect and celebrate different political, sexual and religious preferences and to encourage their museum communities to explore issues, free from the fear of censorship or political pressure (see INTERCOM online and FIHRM online).
The Rio Declaration was made as a direct response to reports that the government of the Russian Federation was in the process of enacting anti-homosexual legislation.

In 2014 in Taipei, capital city of Taiwan (Republic of China), INTERCOM and FIHRM members again came together to agree this Declaration:

Museums make a central contribution to the democratisation of nations by encouraging free debate and confronting authoritarian versions of the truth (See FIHRM online).

The Charter of the Social Justice Alliance for Museums reads:

We celebrate the incalculable value to society of museums and their collections. We support the concept of social justice—we believe that the whole of the public is entitled to benefit from access to the resources museums contain and the ideas they provoke. We pledge to lead the fight for access to museums for all—this is the essence of social justice (see SJAM online).

This is bold positioning by international gatherings of museum professionals. The Declarations show how far museums have travelled since the days when they tended to avoid controversy. At the annual FIHRM conference held at Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand, in 2015 one speaker, Mari Osthaug Moystad of Glomdalsmuseet, Norway, noted that when museums address human rights issues ‘conflict is inevitable’. Richard Sandell of the University of Leicester, UK, referred to ‘curatorial uncertainty’ in this area of our work, while Steve La Hood of Story Inc Ltd, New Zealand, commented that ‘we do take sides’. Luisa de Peña of the Dominican Resistance Memorial Museum, Dominican Republic, warned that museums must be brave about human rights issues or ‘we will disappear into the mist of indifference’.

A further key statement was made in the UK Museums Association’s Museums Change Lives document:

...museums can be ambitious about their role in society. All museums, however they are funded and whatever their subject matter, can support positive social change (Museum Association 2013).

There are numerous examples of museums around the world that endeavour to match up to these expectations, that involve themselves in the difficult decisions needed when dealing with human rights and contested histories, that take positive action.

The Museum of the Gulag, Moscow, Russia

The Museum of the Gulag in Moscow is a state-sponsored institution that castigates the Stalinist regime which once governed the Soviet Union. The museum is an example of one which looks at repression by the State of its own people, and is a powerful indictment of state paranoia (Fig. 1).

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest, Romania

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant is another indictment of totalitarian communism. In the basement of the museum is a parodiac display of life under communism, containing multiple statues of Lenin, hammer and sickle wallpaper, and the desk of a communist official containing little other than signs of drinking and eating; the whole illuminated by bare light-bulbs, resonant of communist austerity. This museum makes its point, a very serious one, through the device of satire.
Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is a complex in Phnom Penh that also condemns state repression, this time by the Khmer Rouge regime that was responsible for millions of deaths in Cambodia in the 1970s. Once a school, then an internment and torture camp, Tuol Sleng is a monument to the victims of the Khmer Rouge, whose bizarre regime was ended only because of military intervention by Vietnamese troops. It is, perhaps, the saddest museum in the world (Fig. 2).

The National 228 Memorial Museum, Taipei, Taiwan (Republic of China)

The National 228 Memorial Museum in Taipei commemorates the victims of the Right Wing Kuomintang (KMT), killed in riots in February 1947. Taiwan’s period of White Terror followed, and only in the 1990s was there freedom to discuss the 1947 incident openly. At the 2015 FIHRM annual conference referred to above, Fred Chin Him-San spoke of the ‘cruel and brutal’ KMT of which he has personal experience.²

The Memorial da Resistencia de São Paolo, Brazil

The Memorial da Resistencia de São Paolo, Brazil, is a tribute to the victims of the Right Wing military dictatorship that ruled Brazil until 1985, and to people who still fight against oppression; in an ironic and contemptuous gesture that has become familiar among human rights museums, this museum is housed in the old headquarters of the State Department for Political and Social Order of the State of São Paolo, a building that witnessed many atrocities against dissident voices who opposed the military regime.
The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, UK

The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, UK, is dedicated to campaigning against human rights abuses worldwide. Its exhibitions are international in nature, ranging from prostitution and people trafficking in the UK to the plight of Dalits in India, and child labourers in Kazakhstan (Fig. 3).

Museum of International Democracy, Rosario, Argentina

The Museo para la Democracia Internacional (Museum of International Democracy) was inaugurated in Rosario, Argentina, on 13 September, 2015, as a tribute to International Democracy Day. Argentina was ruled by a military junta that conducted the ‘Dirty War’ against dissidents, many thousands of whom were ‘disappeared’ by the regime. The Museum of International Democracy is the initiative of Rosario businessman Guillermo Whpei, so its origins are very different from most human rights museums, which tend to be sponsored politically to a greater or lesser degree. It will be interesting to see how the museum fares in a democracy that remains fragile, but it is not at the mercy of political whim (Fig. 4).

Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand

Te Papa Tongarewa is the national museum of New Zealand, whose record of promoting biculturalism is unparalleled anywhere in the world. Notwithstanding the many issues arising out of clashes between Māori culture and museum practice, Te Papa is a beacon which shows that, over time, it is possible to cultivate respectful attitudes that are necessary for a fairer, more just society in a post-colonial context (Fig. 5).
District Six Museum, Cape Town, South Africa

The District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, is another beacon for museums, fighting explicitly as it does against the racism that once characterised the apartheid regime in South Africa.

National Museum of the American Indian, Washington D.C.

The National Museum of the American Indian set out to be ‘an instrument of enlightenment’, an institution that would help bring about ‘reconciliation and recognition in American
history'; a museum that would help build a new relationship between Americans, that would help win respect for and knowledge about Native Americans (see NMAI 2003, p. 7).

These are just a few examples of museums that are active and controversial, that take on the difficult challenge of dealing with contested histories.

**New ways of working with communities**

A number of these museums are good examples of community engagement in museum work; but what do we mean when we speak of 'community engagement'? Surely we mean more than a process of consumption of museum content by the public? Actually, we may mean exactly this, because for many museums the attachment of people living locally to the museum is weak, sometimes non-existent, and cannot be 'taken as read'.

Many museums, including some of those named above, work hard to engage local people, minorities, or disadvantaged groups. And we must never underestimate the value of simply attracting people to the museum who may previously have felt alienated, or who have felt that the museum simply had nothing of relevance or interest on offer. Indeed, for many museums this is the precise challenge. It has been, for example, a recurrent challenge in New Zealand to show convincingly that museums are genuine about including Maori culture in their narratives (Day 2015). It has been a similar story in the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, where we have encountered deep scepticism among the Liverpool Black community about our motivations and relevance.

I would not try to pretend that museums like Te Papa, or the International Slavery Museum, succeed with ease in this quest, but they show that progress can be made if they are clear and consistent in their aims.

Perhaps a deeper form of engagement can be created when the museum is able to share power and invite others to be involved in the museum's work.
In this vein, District Six Museum’s Baluleka Club was created to facilitate the engagement of young people from Cape Town in the museum’s work (see District 6 online). At the Museum of Liverpool, UK, involving teenage girls in the curation of an exhibit on fashion meant playing to an area of immediate interest to the teenagers and brought new expertise to the museum with the *Made Up* exhibition; a group of people with learning difficulties co-curated the *From There to Here* exhibition in 2014, thus challenging all sorts of misconceptions and prejudices; *Postcode* was a project designed to connect young people from deprived neighbourhoods of the city with the museum, capturing the reasons why they were on the streets and damaging their own communities, ensuring that the opinions of the young people were expressed in their own way (they chose to create portraits of themselves that resembled *Old Master paintings*). At the International Slavery Museum, in Liverpool, we have involved schoolchildren in debates about racism, immigration and citizenship; indeed, discussions about citizenship often seem to be fertile ground for the involvement of the public in museum work. At Port Sunlight Museum, UK, a whole village is treated as a museum, with residents as curators of their own properties.
There are hosts of examples of this kind of work, all over the world. There was a time when this kind of approach was well outside the museum sector’s ‘comfort zone’; when trying to engage excluded groups was unthinkable; but today sharing and involving is the new comfort zone for community-oriented museums.

I am writing here on the notion of ‘power’ within the museum, and of power-sharing, or authority-sharing— notions that are very relevant in any discussion of representation in museums that are concerned with human rights. This notion was cited time and again at the FIHRM conference in Te Papa. Again, I would not pretend that sharing authority is easy; on the contrary, it can be threatening to all parties, and is always fraught with complexity and at risk of misunderstanding, of cultural differences, of language, of behaviours. Nonetheless, no human rights museum of any value will reject the notion of power sharing, because it is the only way to ensure engagement by otherwise excluded, and probably alienated, groups.

Notes

1. This is a notion that recurs throughout the works of Stephen Weil, particularly in Making Museums Matter (2002).


3. Fred Chin Him-San, in his paper ‘Narratives from an ex-political prisoner—12 years in prison during the ‘white terror’ period in Taiwan, at the Annual Conference of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums, held at Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand, 22–25 September, 2015.


References


District Six Museum, Cape Town, South Africa. URL: <http://www.districtsix.co.za>.


