



World of Museums

An Ideal Pact with a Pluriform Devil

Introduction

As a member of the European Commission's Working Group on Public Awareness and Cultural Heritage, and as a spokesperson for part of the museum sector, I have been challenged to provide an indication of where the European museums would like to find themselves in about ten years' time, and then to work back to the present day in order to see what must be done in order to arrive there: sketch a strategic master plan, in other words. I am also strictly forbidden to go into technical details, or to sell my own museum's short-term policies, but I am glad to have this opportunity to share some of the thoughts on this subject I developed over the years, in discussion with a number of esteemed colleagues. Within the limited space available I shall not try to set out a Strategic Master Plan, as such, but will confine myself to three propositions only:

- (1) cultural heritage is a quality, not an object;
- (2) the physical survival of many carriers of 'cultural heritage values' depends on the commercial success of a tiny part of them being accepted as popular culture; and
- (3) pluriformity of audiences is a blessing.

Working from these premises, I see no bright future for Europe's cultural heritage institutions unless they re-invent themselves, becoming at least semi-commercial and catering for a society which is highly pluriform. But before drawing a conclusion, let's look at the arguments.

Heritage is Subjective

My axiom is that cultural heritage is not simply an object in itself, but a quality we project, for specific reasons, into objects and structures. The things we've collected in our museums, the structures we've put on our scheduled monument lists, and the buildings we've declared protected World Heritage Sites, have two things in common. They all exist in the present and at the same time carry historical meanings that are projected into them for specific, specialist reasons. History, or those aspects which we have learned are worthwhile for artistic, nationalistic or personal reasons, become apparent, visible, touchable in them. With the exception perhaps of Christian relics, these aspects are never inherent but are ascribed on grounds of background knowledge, study, informed taste. Rembrandt's *Night-watch*, to name my own national heritage icon, has become the symbol of 17th-century Dutch art, not because the Gods made it so but rather because in hindsight

it has turned out to embody, in 19th-century connoisseurs' eyes, those qualities in which contemporary society wished to recognize itself best: size, grandeur, civic pride, a tormented romantic-avant-la-lettre artist, and a prominent artistic position among his peers. You won't appreciate Rembrandt's genius unless and in so far as you have studied his many and often very dreary contemporary competitors. One could name countless examples from other genres with which to prove this point: the alleged works of art and culture are not what they are, they are what we think they are, or want them to be, for that matter.

The motives for these projection mechanisms are varied. Former French President Mitterand chooses for his last resting place Mount Bibracte, the avowed cradle of the French nation, where Vercingetorix was slain by Julius Caesar. Many treasure houses in the world, such as banks, stock exchanges, and of course museums, like to recognize themselves in the icon of the classical Greek temple front, equating it to a dreamed, or wished for, Classical ideal of time-honoured quality, reliability and credibility. Egyptian pyramids and mummies are by far the most popular attractions presented by all Antiquity, no doubt because they feed millions of visitors' hidden desires to feel themselves heirs to ancient wisdoms, mysterious technologies, delightful barbarisms or any mixture of these. Most powerful of all, it seems to me, is the reinforcement of group identity for which cultural heritage is utilized. As a rule, these groups are territorial ('we wish to preserve that which is essential for our history, or for our self-awareness, as a nation/region/city'), but they may also be social, in the sense of intellectual, 'ethnic' (note the inverted commas!) or sub-cultural. Think of the grave of Oscar Wilde in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, Picasso's *Guernica* as contested Basque property, the Medieval Serbian battlefield memorials, or the Stonewall Inn in Lower Manhattan as a gay and lesbian freedom struggle landmark. The point I wish to make is this: cultural heritage-values are by their very nature circumstantial, society related. Once this is accepted, we must next acknowledge the fact that, by force of logic, the status of the carriers of those heritage values will change over time, because contemporary society is in constant change, and so are its values. What 'we' found interesting yesterday is different from what we find of significance today and it will no doubt be different from tomorrow's views.

Museums, as a whole, are not particularly happy with this, let alone co-operative in providing responses to society's changing attitudes. And with reason, because by definition they are best at freeze-drying and framing yesterday's choices (note that I am not talking about contemporary art museums). In itself there is nothing wrong with this. Museums *are*, whether we like it or not, receptacles of values past and constitute at the same time focusses, showcases, interfaces of values present. In my view, museums are mirrors of the anguishes, preoccupations and joys of contemporary society, and, in documenting previous stages in the evolution of social and intellectual values, they are collections of and monuments to... themselves. It would be a good thing if museums were to acknowledge as much. Bodies of cultural heritage, therefore, do *not* equal a collection of pictures, are *not* albums of rare stamps, are *not* exceptionally refined and sophisticated Yellow Pages—and, as a consequence, have little to do with visual databases on the Internet. Museums and what they are about are not a commodity to be marketed, advertised and sold just like the next holiday trip, jeans' line or car brand (even though, admittedly, the 'museum experience' as such may well lend itself to

‘commodification’!). They are more than a Christie’s or Sotheby’s sale catalogue and therefore call for a different approach. But let’s first examine the marketing catch, which I call ‘the pact with the devil’.

A Pact With the Devil

There is an essential difference between the reception accorded to Mozart’s 40th Symphony and Mahler’s 7th, between Rembrandt’s *Nightwatch* and 19th-century Impressionist paintings, in other words between popular culture and elite culture. However, I believe the objects and structures we label ‘cultural heritage’ to exist in both realms. Since not many people will be aware of the mirror-like quintessence of cultural heritage, museums included, most of the things we have collected in our museums will function best as part of elite culture, whose survival depends on the commercial success of the very restricted but much better known parts of it which function in popular culture. Mahler’s 7th, or Shostakovich’s *The Rake’s Progress* for that matter, will today survive only when Mozart’s 40th is being played often enough. The larger part of the collections of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum can be preserved and studied only so long as 90 per cent of its yearly 1.5 million visitors keep coming primarily to see *Nightwatch*. For that matter, my own National Museum of Antiquities will be forced to exhibit and market its top items in an easily accessible way to a very wide audience indeed in order to be able to continue to collect, study and interpret its lesser items, which like it or not do constitute parts of its present and future collection.

It is the same position in which the quality book-publisher finds himself. You’ve got to turn out 12 bestsellers in order to afford the publication of that one superbly produced volume of poems which sells to 200 poetry lovers. I’m told that this kind of old-fashioned literary publisher is slowly dying out, but I do not wish really to believe it, just as I am not convinced that the only future for museums in the next millennium is one in which they are all fiercely competing with on-line exhibitions, turning out one art CD-ROM after the other, and only cater for mass events. The duality here is obvious and should be the subject for further discussion. Do contemporary European museums have a secondary task other than trying to reach out to as large an audience as possible? I think they do, otherwise they should not be called public institutions. Whatever their historical background, being public their mission is to satisfy an audience that is as large and, which is often forgotten and suppressed, as varied as possible. Inevitably this is where the divide is between the private publisher and commercial broadcasting company on the one hand and public institutions—broadcasters and museums alike—on the other.

This is not to say that all museums should act in the same way, creating mixtures of mass and specialist exhibitions all the time. On a higher level of abstraction and in the middle range future, I see regional, or perhaps national, museum structures in which some institutions earn the money for others, by means of catering to mass taste through specially marketed products. From a visitor’s point of view, a *Kunsthalle* is part and parcel of the museum structure in a given city or region. Why not accept this also from the other side of the counter? Why not, in an integrated cultural leisure system, go for niche-marketing, each institution with its own profile?

One step to this end has already been taken in The Netherlands, even though there are relatively few people who realise it, through the introduction of the notion of 'The National Collection' [de Collectie Nederland], embodying all the inventories of the 1,265 public museums and other heritage institutions taken together. Government is gradually forcing museum managements to look at their individual collections as constituent parts of the whole, and, what's more, to adjust their acquisition/alienation policies accordingly.

This brings us to my third and last axiom, the audience point of view.

Pluriform Audiences

Publication of Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1989) heralded also 'the End of the Public' as we know it, or at least of the public as we *thought* we knew it. 'The' public does not exist (so what's new?) but, alas, neither do the A through D socio-economic classes we so comfortably thought we were able to distinguish. Each and every member of the general public, we are told, is a pluriform consumer. In cases of car buying one behaves according to profile A, in leisure expenses according to profile B, and so on and so forth. Neither consumer products, nor lifestyles, nor high-street fashions, nor culture, in other words, seem to have well-defined target audiences any more. The consumer is rampant and defies group-marketing strategies. What is needed, we are again led to believe, is one to one, or direct marketing. Hence the consumption profiles of individual citizens being increasingly monitored, and valued!, by credit card companies, air miles businesses and internet access providers. Hence the call to 'put together your own newspaper', or 'construct your own museum on-line' and the like. Consumer-tailored products, in other words, are certain to become winners. Exciting as this may all sound, I think some profound scepticism is also warranted. In whose interest is it to proclaim a fragmentation of markets? Does a seeming evaporation of known profiles result from real fragmentation or from something else? Could that something else be our own observation instrument? Might there not be, on a deeper level, a distinction in profiles that is as solid as it used to be? Or is tomorrow's consumer really exclusively interested in stock market prices, DVDs and home training equipment, as commercial television news programmes would have us believe? I think there are more permanent and collective background profiles and I'll tell you why.

In 1996, the Archaeological Information Centre, part of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities, had a huge population survey carried out involving 4000 citizens aged over 16 years. We asked them 89 questions, all geared to cultural heritage and in particular archaeology. We wanted to know what the Dutch population knew, felt and did with regard to the archaeological heritage. In exchange for a staggering bill from the commercial market research company we received some extremely interesting answers, such as that about half the population expressed an interest in personally visiting an archaeological dig, should the occasion arise. Combined with other answers, we were able to deduce from this that people were not so much keen on archaeological digs in themselves, but in the narrative they expect to receive from a flesh-and-blood person guiding them around the mysterious traces of a visible past. Another truly revealing result of the survey occurred during the series of qualitative, in-depth interviews we had with a small selection

of the 4000. Following a known, psychological 'laddering' method of questioning, we tried to establish the 'end values' of our interviewees. All in all, these end values turned out to be reducible to three main profiles, in order of frequency: (1) thrill seeking/experiencing; (2) inner harmony/escapism; and (3) spiritual growth/intellectual curiosity.

These profiles of 'depth attitude' correspond to 'progress victims', 'romantics' and 'critical moderns', respectively. In so far as they have any interest in culture and the cultural heritage at all, these groups turn out to be approachable in clearly definable different ways, and to consume cultural heritage products in quite distinct ways. The thrill seekers (bungy jumpers) seem to enjoy electronic gadgets best, together with hands-on experiences, theme parks and the like. Romantics, obviously, wish to dream, to read novels, in solitude and silence. They wish to sniff the mouldy air of bygone days, not seeking background information, and prefer to watch documentaries. The critical moderns, finally, are the old-fashioned core audiences of museums and monuments. Tending to be male, older, better educated and earning larger salaries, they have come with a wish to educate themselves, to read all the captions, facts and figures, and buy and read every exhibition catalogue. You're likely to find *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the bedside table, so to speak.

This is the point where digital media come in. By far the largest group in the general population is constituted by thrill seekers, for whom 'new is better' and for whom 'the past is backward, dull and barbarous'. If museums want to keep their share in the audiences they now enjoy, they cannot but adjust themselves to the demands of this group, making sure that their exhibitions are full of funny electronics, each season new, better, and more surprising. In addition, a new audience can be reached through these means, since the progress victims/thrill seekers traditionally prefer to stay well away from museums. Given what I think are the specifically one-dimensional characteristics of electronic media, past, present and future, it is precisely this group which offers itself as an additional target, additionally or perhaps predominantly when at home, for future developments in this area. These were the people who flocked to the mass mega exhibitions in the past decades. These will be the people that will pay for the existing museum systems to survive, on condition that they, the traditional institutions, also provide what the mass audiences demand. A personalized guide, preferably a living person but, whenever unavailable, a digital one as second best, should be another answer to future consumer demand.

Conclusion

Europe's cultural heritage institutions should re-invent themselves: they mirror changing value systems and would do well to become more aware of it. In order to be able to innovate and to cherish the small, the non-popular, and the minority heritages, they should evolve a double strategy: on the one hand by adopting policies sure to attract large audiences and by living up to the demands of commercial, popular culture; and on the other by focusing on that which is worthwhile from a learned, informed and perhaps elite point of view. As public institutions they cannot and should not do the one without the other. Museums in the 3rd millennium cannot but be pluriform, that is they are bound to take notice of a wide range of expectancies of quite heterogeneous audiences; and the largest

audience will no doubt be very pleased with all kinds of electronic trinkets. Finally: how to get there? I've no idea, let every institution seek the best way for itself, as long as it's aware that a museum is *neither* a collection of pictures *nor* another Sotheby's and that digital media, how wonderful they may be in themselves, are no more than tools which are likely to satisfy only one part of the audience, large as it may be.

Editors' Note

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John Malcolm of Poltalloch

In the creation of the outstanding collections of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum the purchase in 1895 of the collection of prints and drawings formed by John Malcolm of Poltalloch (1805–1893) was a major milestone and at the end of 1996 the British Museum mounted a special exhibition to honour the collector and celebrate the acquisition from his heir of almost one thousand drawings and over four hundred prints. The accompanying catalogue, *Old Master Drawings from the Malcolm Collection*, by Martin Roylton-Kisch, Hugo Chapman and Stephen Coppel, ISBN 0 7141 26101, includes Stephen Coppel's account of Malcolm as a collector which is a reduced and edited version of his essay on William Mitchell and John Malcolm published in *Landmarks in Print Collecting: Connoisseurs and Donors at the British Museum since 1753*, edited by Anthony Griffiths (London, 1996). Together they provide a great deal of information concerning John Malcolm's collecting activity and his relations with Sir J.C. Robinson and William Mitchell whose comprehensive collection of early German woodcuts also entered the British Museum in 1895.

Robinson sold his superb collection of Renaissance drawings to Malcolm in 1860, including 13 sheets attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, 23 to Michelangelo and 13 to Raphael, many of them coming from the famous collection formed by Sir Thomas Lawrence which had been purchased by the London dealers Messrs. Woodburn from his executors in 1835. When Robinson catalogued Malcolm's drawings in 1869 he listed 554 items as coming from his collection, though in the meantime he had continued to act as a buyer for Malcolm. In 1860 Robinson also bought on behalf of Malcolm the large cartoon by Michelangelo depicting *Epifania* which his heir, John Wingfield Malcolm, presented to the British Museum in 1893, and this remains one of the great treasures of the Museum. Following the substantial purchases of 17th century Dutch drawings at the Gerard Leembruggen sale in Amsterdam (March 1866), further purchases made for Malcolm at the Wellesley Sale (June 1866) included 24 drawings by Claude, and according to the list drawn up by Malcolm himself that year he then possessed 718 drawings. Although subsequent purchases included the outstanding Sforza Book of