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What Can Public History Do for Museums, What Can Museums Do for Public History?

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# What Can Public History Do for Museums, What Can Museums Do for Public History?\*

Ilaria Porciani

**Abstract:** In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the dawn of the historical professions, historians did not dismiss working with objects and collaborating with museums. It was the increasing professionalization of the discipline of history that opened a gap between the two. Recent interest in museums and in objects might help connecting these two fields again on a different basis. Investigating the multiple interconnections between historical museums and Public History not only helps to better understand museums or Public History per se, but might also help better understanding of the history of the historical profession, its early developments as well as its present tendencies. This article focuses firstly on new history museums around the world. Secondly, it tackles the issue of the complex relationship between Public History and museum studies. Thirdly, it presents some suggestions on how public historians can interact with museums.

## 1. Introduction: From Objects to Objects

My subject is public history, history outside the academy, linking historians to the broad population interested – sometimes passionately interested – in historical enquiry. Public history is defined by this extension of the domain within which the scholar operates. Public history is thus an attempt to flee from the increasing specialization and decreasing readership of professional academic work, both in journals and in monograph form. It is also a recognition that historical scholarship is intrinsically tied to concepts of educating the public, and not only university students. Public history is an act of civic responsibility. [...] Work in this field is almost always collective, in that it deals with issues too large for one lone scholar to master, express or explain. There's the rub. Public history matters, but its collective character stops many people from going into it. Why? Because the fundamental ethos of the historical profession is individualistic. Collective venture is daring, risky, and rarely yields the recognition that young scholars in particular need at a time of vanishing university posts and cut-backs in university funding<sup>1</sup>.

\* A first version of this article, which draws on my recent works on history museums, was presented as a keynote at the first meeting of the Public History Commission of the ICHS conference, held in Jinan, in August 2015. I wish to thank Serge Noiret and the International Federation of Public History for encouraging me to deal with such a broad topic.

<sup>1</sup> J. Winter, *Public History and the 'Historial' Project, 1986-1998* in S. Blowen, M. Demoissier, J. Picard (eds.), *Recollections of France. Memories Identities and Heritage in Contemporary France*, New York-Oxford, Berghan Books, 2000, p. 52.

Jay Winter, the well-known historian of World War I wrote those words commenting on his own work with the project of the *Historial of Peronne*. They seem to me to be the best introduction to this reflection on Public History and museums. Winter explicitly spoke about Public History and connected it to history museums. He pointed out the «collective» character of collaborative Public History projects and the way they are opposed to the practices and standards of the historical profession, which has grown from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, increasingly defining its borders, ethos and habits, distinguishing between the practitioners of the profession and ‘the others’, and spelling out its strong hierarchical character<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, he specified that «Creating a museum, or an exhibition, or a television series can never be a one-man show»<sup>3</sup>. Thus, he raised the issue of authorship and individuality, a very important one within the profession, which distances it from the practice of collaborative museum work.

The core of the problem, as well as the central aim of the present article, consists precisely in this: connecting Public History to museum work, on the one hand, and on the other to the historical profession as such. Both connections are in my opinion extremely relevant. In fact, I suggest that investigating the multiple interconnections between historical museums and Public History not only helps us better understand the complexity of the issues at stake in the field of museum studies or of Public History per se, but might also help afford a better understanding of the history of the historical profession, its early development as well as its present tendencies, allowing one to look back from a fresh perspective.

Analyzing museums and Public History as a practice should never allow us to forget how increasingly divergent these disciplinary fields had become before the turning point of the 1970s, to the point that they are now almost completely estranged. However, one needs to remember the close involvement of the first history museums with the historian’s work as well as the commitment of both of them to the nation<sup>4</sup>.

How many who write on Public History in museums remember that it was in the *Musée des Monuments Français* that Jules Michelet first discovered his historical vocation? And how many remember that the birth of history museums was initially connected with erudite scholars’ work, or that the process of collecting and analyzing material artifacts was originally intertwined with the analysis of written sources? Documents and monuments stood near one another in the practice of early amateur historians who were also antiquarians and did not yet view themselves as professional historians. The first important collection of sources in the Century of History was named «Historical Monuments of Germany»: *Monumenta Germaniae*

<sup>2</sup> I. Porciani, J. Tollebeek (eds.), *Setting the Standards. Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; I. Porciani, L. Raphael (eds.), *Atlas of European Historiography. The Making of a Profession 1800-2005*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Winter, *Public History and the ‘Historial’ Project*, cit., p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> D. Poulot, *Musée nation patrimoine 1789-1815*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997; Porciani, *Nations on Display. History Museums in Europe*, in *Setting the Standards*, cit., pp. 130-150.

*Historica*. At the dawn of history as a profession, many amateur historians also acted as archaeologists, and studied objects as well as written texts.

In the last decade, cultural history has come back to objects, after a long itinerary which lasted about two centuries and produced, first, the disciplinary borders which have separated professional historiography from more general literary work, and later increasing specialization, only slightly offset by the 1970s claim that interdisciplinary work had become necessary. More recently, objects have appeared again as a topic of study, and a very important one. In short, historians – and not only public historians – are discovering them again, and cultural history is slowly but firmly shifting from «images» to «things». Historians approaching the study of museums are also increasingly focusing on the issue of «objects»<sup>5</sup>. The historians' interest in museums and especially in history museums is to some extent connected to this new way of looking at «things», artifacts or simple items of everyday use which can be extremely telling, if their story and their symbolic value are properly told.

Randolph Starn's important article<sup>6</sup> undoubtedly marked a watershed. It indicated a broad literature which had grown up mainly within the field of museum studies and which deserves to be held in consideration by professional historians. Moreover, it pointed out a new field of interest and work for historians: museums.

My real interest in history museums started when I tried to map the important 'places' where the historical profession was practiced from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Museums seemed to me crucial, in spite of the still relatively little interest in this specific issue by my fellow historians of historiography. Yet even earlier on in my career I had had the experience of creating historical exhibitions and working with objects, telling history through objects<sup>7</sup>. Then it was that I first realized how starting from objects can expand the historian's gaze.

The fundamental thesis of this article that historians should pay attention to museums, and try to work on them, with them, and for them, involving a broader public in various ways. However, this attempt to 'go more public' can never mean forsaking complexity. Focusing on material representations and on object series as they have been assembled in museums by collectors or curators at different times, or working on historical representations should never take the place of constant confrontation with professional historiography and theory, and should always take their complexity into account as a pre-requirement of the work. Objects are objects, and museums, museums: they are inherently different from books or articles, especially those written for an academic audience. This does not mean transforming the physical space of a museum and the visitors' encounter with objects into a cold and academic experience. Hanging long explanations on the walls of a historical exhibition and trying to transform a history museum into an academic article would be utterly wrong. But creating more participative dialogue between source communities and

<sup>5</sup> See D. Poulot, *L'art d'aimer les objets*, Marquis, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> R. Starn, *A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies*, in «The American Historical Review», a. CX, n. 1, v. 110, 2005, pp. 68-98.

<sup>7</sup> See *Le donne a scuola*, ed. I. Porciani, Florence, Il Sedicesimo, 1987.

museums, or opening museums to a broader cooperation of non-professionals can never justify failure to use the rich toolbox that historians have assembled over time. In order to gain in depth and efficacy it is necessary to stand on sound scientific ground, and be rooted in accurate source criticism. In sum, I agree with Jay Winter's caveat that oversimplification and trivialization are always present dangers «in every corner of the historical profession» and not only in Public History performed in museums. However, in the field of Public History, it is probably even more important to avoid such risks. Last but not least, theory is important.

In spite of its title, the present article has no prescriptive aim. First I will present a panorama of major changes in history museums around the world. Secondly I will tackle the issue of the complex relationship between Public History and Museum Studies. As we will see, it is an unbalanced relationship, since Public History has always considered museums while museum studies have often, if not always, ignored Public History. Finally, I will come to some provisional conclusions. I hope they will help towards a better understanding of how public historians can interact with museums. Teaching history in museums also deserves specific attention especially when considering the issue of Public History. However, limits of space make it impossible to deal with it in this article<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. New Museums around the World

Museums were born with a pronounced top-down vocation, a Foucaultian perspective, and a strong normative approach. Today we see museums quickly changing their setting, increasingly refurbishing old rooms, welcoming temporary exhibitions, and contradicting the old paradigm of their more than one hundred year-old history, when museums were cathedrals, didactic institutions, where visitors were to be self-controlled and well behaved, as in a ritual of science or history. We increasingly see museums quitting their walls, becoming *diffuse*, almost without borders, open to cities and communities. Last, but not least, an increasing number of museums are being opened 'without collections', quite the reverse of museums generated by collections or for state reasons. But we also see monumental new museums marking the skyline of cities and upgrading once disrupted areas. A good case in point is the recent Musée des Confluences in Lyon, which deals with important issues of our times: different civilizations, integration of new citizens, but also profound anthropological and ethical issues such as the sense of death and the way men and women face it in different worlds, with an anthropological but also a historical approach.

<sup>8</sup> The bibliography on the topic is abundant. May I just recall E.H. Greenhill, *Museums and Education. Purpose, pedagogy and performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, which encompasses some case studies of major importance to public historians, and M.C. Castle, *Teaching History in Museums*, in «Ontario History», v. XCIV, n. 1, 2002, now available at [www.mccastle.com/UserData/Teachinghistory.pdf](http://www.mccastle.com/UserData/Teachinghistory.pdf) (last access 23 febbraio 2017).



In the last decade, history museums have been at the core of discussions, some of them internationally well known, such as the protest against Sarkozy's project and cancellation of it<sup>9</sup>. In 2016, historians discussed two hot cases, which entail important issues such as the legitimacy of opening a dictatorship museum in a place already heavily marked by the presence of old supporters and new extremists, or the government's imposition that scientific boards of museums change their focus. In Italy, the project to create a museum of Fascism in Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace, has inflamed the historians' world<sup>10</sup>. In Poland, the minister of culture and national heritage announced in April 2016 that he intended to «merge» the Gdansk Museum of the Second World War, created in 2008 and now under construction, with the Westerplatte museum. Thus, he has asked to reduce its scope from the comparative museum imagined by a large scientific board to a purely national and probably much less critical one, covering just «the specific circumstances and tragedy of the Polish experience». Historians and institutions from all over the world have expressed their support for the Museum director, Pawel Machcewicz, and the 'affaire' has hit the headlines. In fact, the issue at stake is political control over important cultural institutions such as history museums, which can be extremely influential on public opinion.

To some extent, museums have figured in the debate<sup>11</sup> centring around the *History Manifesto* published in 2014 by Jo Guldi and David Armitage<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, new history museums have just been planned or created everywhere in the world. More are to come this year. The new Estonian history museum has opened its doors in 2016, while the MuCeM's mission and presentation of the history of the Mediterranean is under discussion. Museums once dedicated to 'civilizations', such as the Canadian one, are taking the new name of history museums after broad discussion involving stakeholders, associations, and hundreds of individuals, and in the upshot choosing a pronouncedly bottom-up approach.

Constant transnational exchanges in museology, museum architecture and exhibition layout have also paved the way for a global turn, at least apparently. One could speak of rapid migration and appropriation of models, and the creation of a common global language, which tries to appeal to a broad public.

In 2009 Steven Conn, a well-known author in the field of museum studies, entitled his well-known book *do museums still need objects?*, highlighting the possibility of conceptual museums where the authentic objects were not so important<sup>13</sup>. In

<sup>9</sup> I. Porciani, *History Museums and the Making of Citizens and Communities*, in P. Aronsson, G. Elgenius (eds.), *National Museums and Nation Building in Europe, 1750-2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2014, pp. 119-141.

<sup>10</sup> S. Noiret, *La public history italiana si fa strada: un museo a Predappio per narrare la storia del ventennio fascista*, [www.dph.hypotheses.org/906](http://www.dph.hypotheses.org/906) (last access 23 febbraio 2017).

<sup>11</sup> T. Söderqvist, *The Museum is Political*, [www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/687216](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/687216) (last access 23 febbraio 2017).

<sup>12</sup> J. Guldi, D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> S. Conn, *Do Museums still need Objects*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

some cases, nowadays museums dealing with history merely display touch screens, as in one of the new Italian museums of the resistance. This is not only a technicality. The old 'still' caption left little room for any critical approach, and allowed just one voice to be heard. Making use of interactive devices also helps to make room for more complex narratives, and allows multi-vocal, more critical, plural voices, while the challenges of web 2.0 open up space in museums for practices that involve larger communities.

Museums used to display 'dead' things, complacently counting on lasting for centuries. Now we have living museums and museums keeping pace with events, continuously created, and increasingly turning into commodities. Museums – especially history museums – used to be the antithesis of fairs (and maybe also universal exhibitions), as Tony Bennett and others have pointed out<sup>14</sup>. Now they seek to attract, to sell a local brand of product (as in the case of the Museum of Scotland), or toys, or even entertainment. The present is there, in all its fragmentation. In a Danish museum an exhibition lasting more than one week featured the true life of a homeless person, to be watched in his everyday activities (collecting cardboard for building a shelter, looking for food, begging, etc.) by visitors to the museum which hosted him. The idea was to study and understand the homeless, and make the people feel and understand their problems and humanity. Thus the 'living exhibition' – which started as a genre in the nineteenth century displaying the almost naked bodies of the colonized subjects in human zoos presented at international venues – was completely reversed in its significance, away from the racialized and racist human zoos, and ended up being more like a big brother TV program, a performance, or some socially engaged activity, than the original living ethnic exhibitions which at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought savages to Europe and made those 'others' the object of the supercilious gaze of gentlemen wearing hats and women holding parasols.

Moreover, and maybe more concretely, in the last decade or so museums have been at the core of negotiations for long-silenced voices. In Australia, museums have mirrored the contradictions of the 1975 Australian Racial Discrimination Act, and have intertwined with the campaign for recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders by the Australian federal constitution. The end of apartheid in South Africa led to the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to the opening of Robben Island<sup>15</sup> and other shrines of memory. The topic of transitional justice, mass graves and community involvement has been crucial, be it in Cambodia, in former Yugoslavia, or in various Latin American and African countries. In almost all those cases museums have played a role. A case in point which caused widespread discussion is Rwanda, where the *gacaca* courts and the involvement of communities in actions of collective – and to some extent forced – remembrance entailed preservation of hundreds of skulls, bones and calcified bod-

<sup>14</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London-New York, Routledge, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Shearing, *A Museum of Hope: a Story of Robben Island*, in «The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science», v. 592, 2004 pp. 62-78.



ies in schools and other spaces, where they remained exposed like some sort of unintentional museum<sup>16</sup>.

The end of dictatorships in Latin America gave rise to the building and planning of several 'memory' museums. In Argentina after the end of the dictatorship the transformation of detention centers into sites of trauma was not organized from the top down, but deeply involved civil society, survivors' associations and NGOs for civil rights<sup>17</sup>. Buildings which had witnessed repression and torture were turned into social centers, education institutes for young people, a place for art shows and theatre performances. These are places of memory which try to encourage discussion, and pave the way for the future. Groups such as the Argentinian Memoria Abierta work around them.

In Chile, by contrast, most memorials and sites of memory mirror the contradictory memory of the past in a society which has not reached reconciliation, nor unearthed all the responsibilities. The Chile Commission for Truth and Reconciliation CNVR (Comisión nacional de la verdad y la reconciliación) has recommended the official government to create memorials to the victims, and the new museum of memory and human rights in Santiago bears witness to the abuses of the Pinochet regime. The Tuol Sleng museum in Phnom Penh and certain other new Chinese sites of memory are purely top-down institutions, based on precise identity policies, which may not be styled nationalist, but again imply a focus on memory and not on history, nor any attempt to analyze the real responsibilities. Bloodstains on the ground make a strong emotional impact, but how much historical reflection is there? Not much more than in the Hungarian Terror Haza analyzed in rigorously historical style by Peter Apor<sup>18</sup>, which is silent about so many crucial issues for Hungarian history.

In Washington, the National Museum of American Indians (2004) adopted an identity-based paradigm in its cultural policy based on the concept of a largely constructed «Indian voice»<sup>19</sup>. A bias towards essentialism seems to shine through. However, this museum had the merit of initiating dialogue with representatives of the Native Americans. In 2016, the new museum of African American History recently inaugurated in the Washington Mall by President Obama with a passionate talk, went more than one step further than the Museum of Afro-American History in Detroit (1965) in representing the subaltern voices of the African Americans and their contribution to the nation. The Museum of the Chinese in America (New York 1991), along with many smaller ones, focuses on the role and importance of Chinese

<sup>16</sup> [www.rwanda.ywpschools.net/node/866](http://www.rwanda.ywpschools.net/node/866) (last access 23 febbraio 2017); see also next special issue on museums and traumas in «Storicamente», [www.storicamente.org](http://www.storicamente.org), 2017.

<sup>17</sup> P. Violi, *Paesaggi della memoria. Il trauma, lo spazio, la storia*, Milano, Bompiani, 2014, p. 240; C. Demaria, P. Violi, *Arte e memoria. Il Parque de la Memoria di Buenos Aires*, in «Storicamente», [www.storicamente.org](http://www.storicamente.org), 2017.

<sup>18</sup> *An Epistemology of the Spectacle? Arcane Knowledge, Memory and Evidence in the Budapest House of Terror*, in «Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice», v. 18, n. 3, 2014, pp. 328-344.

<sup>19</sup> C. Pagani, *La «voce indiana» in Campidoglio: una lettura politica del National Museum of the American Indian*, in «Passato e Presente», n. 89, 2013, pp. 82-101.

immigration, which was recently the focus of the 2014 exhibition by the New York Historical Society.

The master narrative of national history museums may still be unbalanced and continue to focus on traditional representations and topics. Yet, changes are visible. In Canada, museums have been central to implementing the official policy of multiculturalism first announced by Pierre Trudeau and formalized by the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada (1988). «The challenge raised by aboriginal activism against the traditional construct of Canada as a settler nation rooted in colonial histories provided not just the backdrop to a history of museums change but was also the enabling condition»<sup>20</sup>.

The bitter criticisms and controversies which followed the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian are well known. Controversy has not been lacking elsewhere. Museums «have been picketed, boycotted and criticized for perpetuating colonial ideologies and oppressive policies, they have been called upon by governments to implement official multicultural policies, and some have chosen to play proactive roles by advocating more radical forms of social intervention and reform»<sup>21</sup>. The Museum of Canadian Civilization used to mirror the history of the country by splitting it into two distinct floors representing respectively the first nations and the settlers. Now, the process leading to the creation of the new museum of Canadian history is characterized by an intense dialogue with the nation as well as by consultation of many different groups.

The fall of the Berlin wall opened a breach and defined a big rupture in our history. Thus, it will not come as a surprise if major changes have taken place in the countries of Eastern Europe where the memory of the crimes perpetrated by Stalin and the repression of nationalism have led to the closing of many museums. Polish soviet-era museums have been dismantled. The emerging of different and often-bitter memories, and the discussion of memory issues, have had immediate consequences for the opening of new museum rooms, temporary exhibitions, or whole new museums.

The end of the cold war created the framework for a newly constructed European identity and for deep revisions. In Moscow the closing of the Lenin memorial (1993) does not stand alone: the Museum of the Revolution changed its name to the Museum of Russian Contemporary History. Latvia and Lithuania have started programs to recreate national identity as a response to previous sovietization displaying national history identified in terms of ethnicity. National museums were also at the forefront of emphasizing national identities. In France and in the Netherlands, attempts to create new national museums reproducing old nationalist master narratives have been made. They failed after keen opposition by both history professionals and other agencies in society.

The memory of colonialism has been discussed in former colonial museums, which are going through a process of revision, as in the Tropenmuseum of Amster-

<sup>20</sup> R.B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: towards the Indigenation of Canadian Museums*, Montreal, Kingston, London, Ithaca, McGill-Queens University Press, 2011, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 6.

dam and the Congo museum in Tervuren near Brussels. Spaces once devoted to the celebration of colonial possession (and oppression) such as La Porte Dorée in Paris host new institutions such as the *Cité de l'immigration* and open their premises to the objets-témoins of the immigrants (but are silent about the former French colonies and the Algerian war).

In China new museums both mirror the long tradition of communist narrative and to some extent combine it with the new emphasis on deregulation, marketization and the like: «unlike much of the rest of the culture industries in China, museums continue to rely heavily on state funding for their existence. As a result, their exhibits tend to reinforce state ideology, but like the state political rhetoric itself, museums are caught between an old socialist discourse and a new ideology of the market»<sup>22</sup>. The communist martyrdom, promoted in the Mao era, has been prolonged, expanded and adapted to «keep alive the memory of the revolution and the importance of self-sacrifice to its success and, by implication, the success of China's recent modernization and rise in the world»<sup>23</sup>, while the commemoration of other martyrs (such as those of the cultural revolution and Tienanmen 1989) is left to other alternative voices.

Problems and controversy surround almost all war museums, from the Yasukuni shrine in Japan, to the former British museums in Africa which used to display World War II tanks and weapons in order to represent the victory over Nazism, but which after decolonization appear in a very different light. It is precisely these gaps, debates and controversies that are of such interest to us.

Often, the kinds of museum which are more interesting to us scholars concerned with Public History deal with the connection, and sometimes the gaps, between history and memory: an issue far too complex to be summarized in a limited space.

### **3. Museums and Public History: an Unbalanced Relationship**

Public History has always focused the greatest attention on museums, especially history museums, while the disciplinary field of museum studies and scholars dealing with museums have only rarely themed Public History as such. In other words, they have seldom accorded it the specific attention it deserves. Thus, the relation is unbalanced.

Right from the early phase of defining its tasks and disciplinary area as a new discipline, periodicals devoted to Public History recorded what was happening in the museums' world, while academic history continued to be reluctant to do so or at most considered it as divulgation.

<sup>22</sup> K.A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Post-socialist China*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2014, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 97.

Looking back at the origins of Public History Marla Miller wrote: «The outlines of public history education as we recognize it today can be traced to the 1950s, when perspective archivists, museum professionals, such as other public historians began to obtain training in graduate programs in universities [...]. Scholars interested in everyday life turned to new sources as American culture study blossomed as a field of methodological enquiry [...] historians interested in artifacts drew closer to professionals in museums and historic sites. [...] The interdisciplinary nature of American studies, as well as its usually close relationship with material culture studies has meant that scholars associated with this field of enquiry have also forged a productive relationship with museum and historic sites»<sup>24</sup>.

The peculiarity and early birth of American Public History is thus placed in a context of its own, subverting the hierarchies of the profession and encouraging the new practical skills required by the modern public historian. Museums obviously played a crucial role in this process.

General introductions to Public History as well as Public History readers have also always paid attention to museums. The Public History reader edited by Hilda Kean and Paul Martin (a canon if not a bible)<sup>25</sup> has hosted several contributions focusing on the role of tangible and intangible heritage, and museums not only for historians but also for the construction or reconstruction of a community starting from a museum. The same is true for other recent readers in other languages<sup>26</sup>. More recently, Thomas Cauvin, author of a recent Public History textbook has also devoted large attention to museums as a crucial part of Public History<sup>27</sup>.

In 1989 Roy Rosenzweig and Warren Leon edited *History Museums in the United States. A Critical assessment*, still an extremely useful book. They were critical of easy solutions, and conscious of the problems that arise when moving from the printed page of the history essay to a museum display. No other authors – in my opinion – have pointed out this aspect with such precision. «Indeed, form can have a shaping effect on the content; the medium can become the message. Because the exhibit is in many ways a more complex mode of communication than the book or article, it is more complex to control meaning. A single powerful artifact or image, for example, can overwhelm the carefully crafted message spelled out in dozens of labels. Given the enormous perils and possibilities of museum-based presentations of the past, matters of exhibit design and strategy must be part of any serious evaluation of the work of history museums»<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> M.R. Miller, *Playing to Strength: Teaching Public History at the Turn of the 21st Century*, in «American Studies International», vol. 42, n. 2-3, 2004, pp. 177-178.

<sup>25</sup> H. Kean, P. Martin, *The Public History Reader*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> See the J. Liddington, *O que é História Pública? Os públicos e seus passados*, in J.R. De Almeida and M.G. De Oliveira Rovai, *Introdução à história pública*, São Paulo, Letra e Voz, 2011, pp. 31-52.

<sup>27</sup> T. Cauvin, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice*, New York and London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 30-54 and *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> W. Leon, R. Rosenzweig, *History Museums in the United States. A Critical Assessment*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. XVIII.



Rosenzweig and Leon evaluate exhibitions, big-city museums, historical homes, and case studies such as the Gettysburg battlefield or even the presentation of American life at Disneyland with a strongly historical approach. The constraints of institution politics, audience, and financing affect museum presentations much more than Public History works. «The past is too important to be left to the private sector. If we wish to restore our social health, we had better get beyond Mickey Mouse history».

Public historians warned against the 'lies' that are told in museums and historic sites. For instance James W. Loewen unmasked the misinformation that too often is transmitted in such places: important memorials misquote from the Declaration of Independence and Jefferson's writings are manipulated in order to present that slave owner as a near abolitionist<sup>29</sup>.

Public history journals and the Public History commons have observed closely what happens in the world of museums from the very beginning and continue to do so.

The «Public History Review» has revisited major classic museums<sup>30</sup>; deconstructed history exhibitions<sup>31</sup>; dealt with projects concerning both objects and oral history and including online museums<sup>32</sup>; suggested ways of teaching Public History through transnational museum partnership<sup>33</sup>; explored the tensions created as curators, communities and critics increasingly seek to control representations in history exhibitions<sup>34</sup>; and finally analyzed African museums from various approaches<sup>35</sup>.

«The Public Historian» has constantly reviewed historical exhibitions, has dealt extensively with issues such as museums as democracy-building institutions, and has analyzed the standards required for a museum curator<sup>36</sup>; it has pointed out the peculiar position of museum historians, often «caught between the public's perception of history as 'dry as dust' and criticism from academic historians who charge

<sup>29</sup> J.W. Loewen, *Lies Across America. What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Simon and Schuster, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> E. Duthie, *The British Museum: an Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World*, in «Public History Review», n. 18, 2011, pp. 11-25.

<sup>31</sup> A.M. Condé, 'War History on Scrap of Papers'. *Exhibitions of documents at the Australian War memorial 1922-1954*, in «Public History Review», n. 14, 2007, pp. 25-43.

<sup>32</sup> See P.L. Richards, *Online Museums, Exhibits, and Archives of American Disability History*, in «The Public Historian», v. 27, n. 2, 2005, pp. 91-100. See also J. Wilton, *Oral History, Objects, and an Online Exhibition*, in «Public History Review», n. 16, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> R.J.W. Harker, *Museums Connect: Teaching Public History through Transnational Museums Partnership*, in «The Public History Review», n. 22, 2015, pp. 56-58.

<sup>34</sup> J. Wilton: *Museums and Memories: Rethinking the Past in Local and Community Museums*, in «Public History review», n. 12, 2006, pp. 58-79.

<sup>35</sup> B.D. Ghee, *The Invaluable Institutional History: Ghana's National Museum from a Obronni Perspective*, in «Public History Review», n. 22, 2015, pp. 38-55.

<sup>36</sup> M. Russell-Ciardi, *The Museum as a Democracy-Building Institution: Reflections on the Shared Journeys Program at the Lower East-Side Tenement Museum*, in «The Public Historian», v. 30, n. 1, 2008, pp. 39-52.



that history museum presentations are superficial, filopietistic shows of color and motion»<sup>37</sup>.

Various authors have criticized nostalgia for the past in museums and museum villages financed by private capital, pointed out the political background of some campaigns for heritage protection, and highlighted how changes in the public can pave the way for changes in museums' narrative, as apparently happened even in classic memory places such as Monticello.

*Public History News from the National Council of Public History* likewise paid attention to museums from very early on, considering the case of Living History-Museums, the use of actors, and the background of museums' task forces.

Other scholarly journals such as the *Radical History Review*, which in 1987 started a section specifically devoted to Public History, have dealt with the issue of history museums.

Public Historians have often suggested cooperation between museums and historians, pointing to an often non-idyllic partnership and have asked themselves why it is often so difficult to cooperate over those differing institutions which to some extent have converging aims. «Both sides have to work to reach out to a different kind of audience»<sup>38</sup>. They have also pointed out the often uncritical note of celebration that creeps into historic houses.

Along with readers and journals, many Public History courses offer syllabi including museum studies: the list would be too long to quote here extensively.

While Public History journals and publications have constantly devoted attention to museums (but often ignored many journals of museum studies such as *Museum and Society*, the field of museum studies has rarely taken into account Public History as such. To be sure, recent readers on museum studies as well as publications resulting from large EU projects on museums such as Eunamus and MeLa<sup>39</sup> have dealt with issues typical of Public History but have rarely named Public History as such.

## 4. Conclusions

At the beginning of the third millennium the rich museum world is characterized by a multiplicity of agencies, both public<sup>40</sup> and private, rapid changes of paradigms

<sup>37</sup> T.A. Woods, *Getting Beyond the Criticism of History Museums: A Model for Interpretation*, in «The Public Historian», v. 12, n. 3, 1990, pp. 76-90.

<sup>38</sup> M. Prycer, *Intersections. Getting to Know You: Universities and Museums Working Together*, in «The Public Historian», 2007.

<sup>39</sup> [www.ep.liu.se/eunamus](http://www.ep.liu.se/eunamus) (last access 23 febbraio 2017); [www.mela-project.polimi.it](http://www.mela-project.polimi.it) (last access 23 febbraio 2017).

<sup>40</sup> On public museums see the chapter *History Museums*, written by me, to be published in a forthcoming *State Sponsored History Reader*, B. Bevernage and N. Wouters (eds.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017 (title to be confirmed).

and functions, increasing self-reflectivity and reconceptualization. There is plenty to do for public historians. More than ever museums are public areas that imply «practices that communicate and engage with history»<sup>41</sup>. If history is not the prerogative of the historian, but «the work of a thousand different hands»<sup>42</sup>, museums are the right place to practice it.

Museums offer a great opportunity to start from the materiality of objects. Because of their special nature and the attraction of large publics, which do not necessarily read books nor have been previously involved in oral history experiments, they can work as catalyzers for memories and trigger oral history projects, promoting collections of tangible as well as intangible heritage involving many groups and social classes. Thus museums can gather sources, be they objects which can evoke emotions and traumatic moments, or texts at risk of disappearing with the death of the witnesses.

Opening up a history «which refuses to be safely boxed away in card indexes or computer programs» and pivoting «on the active relationship between past and present, subjective and objective, poetic and political» can probably be done in a fascinating way starting from museums, objects, materiality. New museums, which try to attract young visitors and visitors who have not had the habit of visiting museums, probably offer the best opportunities for stimulating popular history-making which lies at the core of the Public History mission.

Steven Lubar, curator of the temporary exhibition *sharing memories* which opened in 1995 on World War II, wrote:

«The goal of a history exhibit is to move people from ideas and information that they bring with them to the exhibit to a more complex, problematic, and nuanced view of the past. Exhibits should not be limited to reminiscence or commemoration, they should add perspective by aspiring to a greater historical distance and by putting the artifacts in context». After the harsh debate that followed the fiasco of the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian, he wrote, «we needed to move beyond the usual museum exercise to present history from a historian's perspective, beyond our usual techniques of displaying objects and providing explanations and interpretations, these techniques privileged historical analysis and the refuse of memory [...] we had to find a way to allow both history and memory to play a role»<sup>43</sup>.

Memory might be a useful starting point in museums. Yet history remains central. Thus, historians should make good use of all their tools, from critical appraisal of sources to efforts of conceptualization, bridging the often stormy river between popular and academic history. The increasingly rich toolbox of the historian might not be a light one to carry, but it will serve to make the journey safer. The use of new technologies might help in this direction, allowing more flexibility and individuality.

<sup>41</sup> P. Ashton and P. Hamilton, *History at The Crossroads: Australians and the Past*, Ultimo N.S.W., Halstead Press, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, London, Verso, 1994, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> S. Lubar, *Exhibiting Memories*, in *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. S. Watson, London-New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 399.

Thanks to interactive screens and digital devices, museums can speak to a diverse public at the same time: from children and less educated publics to well-educated visitors who want to get deeper insight into exhibits. The new museum of the history of Marseille presents a very interesting solution: in short videos at the beginning of each section of the permanent exhibition the historians themselves are shown life size. They are heard advancing explanations and points for reflection: doing their job, in short.

It might be true that history is too important to be left to professional historians alone. However, it also seems to me too important to be left to museum curators or source communities. Public historians are there to combine their objectives with the critical tools that the history discipline has shaped over time. Participatory observation might be useful. However, in my opinion, as François Hartog suggests, it is even more useful not to forget the heuristic possibilities of that «regard éloigné» that helped anthropologists to look at their own society starting from what they saw within people living in very different worlds. This gaze might help us to see better and deeper.

Interdisciplinarity becomes the more vital since museums lie at the center of an increasingly rich and complex area. It is no easy task. Specialist literature, *ad hoc* publications and exhibition catalogues directly involving public historians have multiplied beyond all bounds and are mushrooming wildly, it seems to me. Specialist journals and museologist conferences like ICOM and offshoots (especially ICOMOS) often focus on crucial issues for public historians. However, they may lack the necessary depth to shed light on long-, medium- and short-term points of continuity and rupture, or bring out all the complexity of apparently circumscribed or purely local episodes, phenomena that gain great significance if properly considered as case studies and linked up with the kind of questions that historians ask themselves. There is lots of scope for public historians here.

The comparative approach can protect from three risks that I see dogging many history museums in the last few years: essentialism, pillarization, and nationalism. The itch to include groups that used to be left out has led to ‘adding’ operations. Such groups have been concentrated on at the risk of «essentialising» their identity, as I have tried to show in a recent essay. Focusing on specific differences and purely original features has often obscured connections and points of contact. Museums have always contained materials from interwoven histories, but only recently have they started to present these interwoven histories in a new way, drawing attention to the formation of the collections and the different ways they can be used to represent contacts and links; they explore what are often complicated ties extending beyond static, two-way relationships. In short: it is the exchange that should be discussed, studied and displayed within museums as contact zones<sup>44</sup>.

Nationalistic approaches might well be comprehensible in countries whose national identity was often brutally repressed. In Ukraine and the Baltic countries

<sup>44</sup> J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones*, in Id., *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997.

paradigms have been reversed. Stressing the joys of socialism, friendship with the Soviet Union and internationalism used to be typical of Cold War museums. Now they are all for nationalism and proto-nationalism, perhaps of ethnic origin. Loss of roots has prompted a need to overstate their vigour and longevity and plug points of nationalist policy that were in vogue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even in certain western European museums the urge to stress identity in an atmosphere of devolution or separatism has led to ethnic and at times even geological differences being harped on (Scotland, Catalonia). It is up to public historians to deconstruct such approaches. Lastly, it will be interesting to analyse how political tensions reverberate within the European Union and how Europe represents herself as 'one big home' vis-à-vis representation of national histories.

Of course, the museums of interest to Public History are not just national ones. I would say the local level has actually produced better interaction and a richer relationship with communities, whether in the United Kingdom going through its phase of deindustrialization, or Asia, South Africa or Latin America. It is just such cases where museums as the center of a community may comprise a pole onto which tangible and intangible heritage can be made to converge. Oral history continues to be central. One effective case of oral history occurring way back in the 1980s when Michael Mitterauer launched his «storytelling circles» (*Erzählungskreise*) of elderly Austrians sparked off a fruitful interaction with a radio broadcast and a scientific journal series. That example could usefully be repeated in local museums.

This raises at least two kinds of problem. First, the danger of omnivorous presentism. It is above all the local level that feels the need to «conserve for conservation's sake' and exhibit for the sake of exhibiting» – something that Hartog<sup>45</sup> and others warned against. It is not just a question of scale or maybe over-indulgence in nostalgia for a recent past that is on the way out. There remains a more general issue. Often the problem lies 'upstream', maybe in a crisis of historicity regimes and not in decisions taken by individual museums. I fear it may be difficult to find a way round this.

More and more frequently museums are using oral history in the form of filmed interviews. This is so in the latest version of the Congo Museum where you can listen to independence movement leaders as well as whites such as clerks, schoolmistresses and nurses relating how decolonisation changed their lives. People's voices and faces can be heard and seen in many world museums as they go over to narrating the history of various ethnic groups forming the backbone of the country, as at Pointe à Caillière (Montreal) and the Cité de l'Immigration. One result of this world trend is that such voices of second-generation immigrants telling how they managed to fit into the new country begin to resemble one another, especially in their desire to sell themselves as success stories. Use of oral history may help, but it can also cause problems, especially when it is conducted on film and then exposed to the gaze of museum visitors so that the filter of anonymity is lost. This has been nicely expressed in the volume *Museum Ethics*. As Bernadette Lynch pointed out,

<sup>45</sup> F. Hartog, *Regimi di storicità. Presentismo e esperienze del tempo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2006.



sometimes people who agreed to give interviews opening up their private life are quite uncomfortable when their interviews are visible in museums. In this case, too, it is probably not easy to find the right recipe. To be sure, the difference between the written page and the visual document on display for all, and therefore really public, should not be underestimated.

Gastronomy is often chosen as the vehicle of identity – something intimate yet highly social. This can be boosted by the growth sector of food history (which is by now almost a sub-discipline in its own right).

What is harder to record and analyze are stories of peaceful exchange which cannot be (and have not been) narrated as success stories. No doubt the public historian ought to analyze these silent areas as well. To give an example, at the Cité de l'Immigration there was no coverage of the complex *banlieues* story which is central if we are to understand some critical points of difficulty. Maybe historians could lend a hand here by looking out for examples that are of interest to the museum field. Consider, for example, the Brazilian favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Here the Cantagallo favela, now free of the drug racket, has opened up to new forms of participation, community history told via a museum where the community narrates itself – with a tourist potential that was quite unthinkable only a few years ago. Once again, there is a subtle balance to be struck between history and memory.

At the crossroads of Public History and social engagement, another problem emerges. Museum studies (and to some extent Public History contributions) have pointed out the complex relation of museums with source communities in the case of both exhibitions and permanent museums. I here use the concept of source community or originating community in the widest sense, meaning not only indigenous people in the Americas and the Pacific, but every cultural group for whom museums have collected: local people, the diaspora, immigrant communities, religious groups, settlers.

Peers and Brown remind us that working with communities is an ongoing process, which should not be abandoned once the project is completed. A museum often establishes links with a community on the occasion of an exhibition. Once the funding is spent, the members of the community feel abandoned. Can public historians help in this process? If so, how? Probably, they can also help build the skills necessary to keep the history of the community alive and to involve younger generations within and outside the small group of people directly involved with the museum and its objects.

Museums that are trying to shake of the dust and become places of active history very often go in for re-enactment or time travel. This, we know, is far from a recent innovation. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were living museums doing just that, like Skansen in Stockholm and the United States Williamsburg, while gender museums have increasingly widened their ambit in this direction. Where once the principals would confine themselves to explaining, say, how objects were manufactured, they now tend to present a cross-section of society and its economic and social exchanges.

A recent issue of «The Public Historian» has convincingly extended its coverage to historic houses, and these present another kind of problem. «Once they are



devoid of the people who animated them in the first place, domestic spaces tend to become mausoleums – meaningful in their permanence, but petrified and lifeless in their presentation. Resuscitating these spaces while denying their care function as shelter is perhaps an irreconcilable contradiction. Yet as their peculiar expression of Public History reaches well into its second Century...professionals are beginning to reimagine these sites as active, breathing spaces to engage with both the past and the present»<sup>46</sup>. This is another challenge, since the staff engaged in this kind of activity need to be properly prepared. This is where public historians are finding enormous scope opening up. In history museums all too often it is administrators who dictate the historiographical policy. Historians should clearly be more involved. Rosenzweig and Leon warned: «the volunteer docents at a historic house [...] may (consciously or unconsciously) present their own version of the past, one that is at odds with the institution's official message»<sup>47</sup>. It is also the historian's task to train the front line staff who are so important in mediating the image of the museum and engaging with and involving various kinds of public.

Yet the most complex and problematic issue is the presence of conflicts: different, often opposite voices and opinions among the various groups involved.

Richard Sandell uses the term «moral activism»<sup>48</sup> to suggest how museums might realize their potential as agents of change in promoting social inclusion and human rights both inside and outside the museum. Social inclusion, radical transparency and shared guardianship of heritage are to him the most important issues, along with self-reflexivity. For him, a paradigmatic shift in the purpose and role of museums in society, and concomitant changes in working practices, will be required to help creative conflict be successful in eliciting change.

However, the issue at stake is collaboration, contestation and creative conflict. Chantal Mouffe suggested that «antagonism ... could be dealt with more productively. If we understand the relationship between the museum and its community partners as no longer simply one of 'responsibility' for the other, in a patronizing way, nor one of 'enemies' in a stand-off situation, we could understand it as a respectful relationship between 'adversaries' or 'friendly enemies'»<sup>49</sup>.

The most useful reflections on this issue come in my opinion from Bernadette Lynch, the former curator of the Manchester museum, who saw at first hand the concrete problems and difficulties arising in exchanges with the different ethnic groups present in the city and asking to be actively involved in the museum.

«These two sides share a common symbolic space – the museum – despite their very real differences. On this view, the symbolic space of the museum-as-contact-zone could be understood as the political space of encounter between adversaries, where the power relations which structure these encounters are brought to

<sup>46</sup> L. Junkin Lopez, *Introduction, "Open House: Reimagining the Historic House Museum"*, in «The Public Historian», v. 37, n. 2, 2015, pp. 10-13.

<sup>47</sup> Leon and Rosenzweig, *History Museums in the United States*, cit., p. XIX.

<sup>48</sup> R. Sandell, *Museums Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> C. Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*, London, Verso, 2011.

the fore, creating a liberating effect for museums and their community partners»<sup>50</sup>. If museums provide the space, Public History can provide the strategies and practices. It is up to public historians, and not only museums, to facilitate this process. As a Maori activist put it: «I lack language. The language to clarify my resistance to the literate»<sup>51</sup>. Various different experiences have so far helped the people from source communities to bring their experience and challenge the traditional «knowledge-based» power in the interpretation and contextualization of collections<sup>52</sup>.

Lynch suggests that objects can act as symbols, and thus be a useful device for producing storytelling and memories connected to the object itself. «The object helps unlock experience and becomes the catalyst for communication, for intercultural understanding and, sometimes, resistance»<sup>53</sup>. The «talking objects» exhibition in the British Museum certainly helped especially young people to feel more confident and free and to approach the museum personnel with fresh questions. The object biographies were important and – especially when related to colonial collections – they helped some young people to report on the legacies of colonialism on their own lives. A lively debate started out by focusing on the destiny of former objects from Africa kept in Western European museums. One young man argued that across much of Africa, people were in no position to have these collections returned, because «we are still colonized in our mind»<sup>54</sup>. Museums can help rethink these issues starting from objects, but they cannot do more than that.

Let me conclude with a quote from President Obama's keynote at the opening of the African American Museum. The quote is long, but deserves attention.

A museum alone will not alleviate poverty in every inner city or every rural hamlet. It won't eliminate gun violence from all our neighborhoods, or immediately ensure that justice is always colorblind. It won't wipe away every instance of discrimination in a job interview or a sentencing hearing or folks trying to rent an apartment. Those things are up to us, the decisions and choices we make. It requires speaking out, and organizing, and voting, until our values are fully reflected in our laws and our policies and our communities.

But what this museum does show us is that in even the face of oppression, even in the face of unimaginable difficulty, America has moved forward. And so this museum provides context for the debates of our times. It illuminates them and gives us some sense of how they evolved, and perhaps keeps them in proportion. Perhaps it can help a white visitor understand the pain and anger of demonstrators in places like Tulsa and Charlotte. But it can also help black visitors appreciate the fact that not only is this younger generation carrying on traditions of the past but, within the white communities across this nation

<sup>50</sup> B. Lynch, *Collaboration, contestation, and creative conflict. On the efficacy of museum/community partnerships*, in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. J. Marstine, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 155.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, eds. V. Golding and W. Modest, London, Bloomsbury, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Lynch, *Collaboration, contestation, and creative conflict*, cit., p. 155.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 157.

we see the sincerity of law enforcement officers and officials who, in fits and starts, are struggling to understand, and are trying to do the right thing.

It reminds us that routine discrimination and Jim Crow aren't ancient history, it's just a blink in the eye of history. It was just yesterday. And so we should not be surprised that not all the healing is done. We shouldn't despair that it's not all solved. And knowing the larger story should instead remind us of just how remarkable the changes that have taken place truly are – just in my lifetime – and thereby inspire us to further progress.

And so hopefully this museum can help us talk to each other. And more importantly, listen to each other. And most importantly, see each other<sup>55</sup>.

Maybe public historians can help in this direction as well.

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<sup>55</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/24/remarks-president-dedication-national-museum-african-american-history](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/24/remarks-president-dedication-national-museum-african-american-history) (last access 23 febbraio 2017).