

Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century

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I have tried to use my personal experience in the last 40 years, in order to write a short paper on the theme of this seminar. Although I went through a number of articles, I found that the theme was so new in the minds of museum workers that it was almost impossible to find anything written by the great museum specialists of this century.

When I requested a bibliography on the subject from the UNESCO Library, I got a list of 21 articles covering Africa, Somali Democratic Republic, America, USA, Asia, Cambodia and the Pacific Islands, and Europe, France, Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain and Ukraine. The articles were on: “The Peace Museums of Japan”; “Museum design in Los Angeles: the beginning or the end of the dinosaurs”; “Cambodia’s ‘killing fields’ revisited: the Tuol Sleng Museum and the Memorial Stupa at Choeung Ek”; an address by Mr. Frederico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, at the dedication of the Beit-Hashoah Museum of Tolerance (Los Angeles, 3 Feb. 1993); “The German Underground Hospital in Jersey”; “Auschwitz: the strangest museum”; “The Caen Memorial (France)”; the War Museum of Athens; “The Spirit of Hiroshima”, “The Chicago Peace Museum”; “The Peace Museum Concept”; “Museums of War and Peace”; “A Museum for Peace”; “The Kiev Memorial Complex in the International Year of Peace (1986)”; “The Goethe Museum, Weimar”; three UNESCO consultant reports on the Somali National Museum/Antiquities development; museums in the Pacific islands; and the Museum of German History.

When I tried to examine how the government of my own country (Uganda) looks at museums in the country, I referred to the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda. Article 189, Functions and Services for Which Government is Responsible, Item 10 lists the following areas of responsibilities: national monuments, antiquities, archives and public records, as Parliament may determine. It seems to me, therefore, that there is need to ask the Uganda Parliament to include the National Museum or the Uganda Museum in the Constitution, before it is too late.

I have used the example of my own country in order to show that museums are very often forgotten when they should be remembered. I recall vividly that a few weeks before Uganda achieved independence (9 October 1962) the government was proud of having added an “Independence Wing” at the Uganda Museum. This, I believe, was a way of commemorating Uganda’s history. But more than 30 years later we started seeing the degradation of the Uganda Museum, from which, it seemed, the government was turning its back. Why? Perhaps we could say this was due to economic reasons.

I can recall that in 1972 – soon after the military regime had taken power in Uganda – I had to guide a number of soldiers round the Museum. They had come to learn the history and culture of the country from the Museum. I deeply regret that I could not find a single exhibit in the Museum which gave lessons of democracy, peace, or any other topic informing these fellow citizens that it was wrong to overthrow a democratically elected government through force of arms. I am aware that if they had found such an exhibit, I am sure, today I would not be here with you.

Why museums, peace, democracy and governance in the 21st century?

It is true that the game of today and perhaps tomorrow is “survival of the richest.” It is not true that museums are seen to be failing in their role because of the lack of money. And what is the role of museums, today, tomorrow and beyond? Add to education, science, culture, communication, human rights, environmental protection, a fight against diseases, good agricultural methods, and a fight against poverty. But how should a museum go about playing this enormous role when it is normally a poor institution? The key that opens all these I believe is through “talking to the population that the museum serves in convincing language,” namely by becoming good salesmen and saleswomen.

Please allow me to put the question in reverse by starting with the 21st century, which we are all looking forward to with a lot of excitement. Please be careful so that the excitement of this event does not turn into a tragedy on the first day of the millennium. The mass media – radio, TV, the press – will all be there to play with our minds – merely in order to make money by capitalising on certain attainments, such as the first babies of the century, or a woman or man of three centuries, meaning a person born in 1896 or even 1899 who will have reached the year 2000. This is news, so what. It so happens that certain geographical areas are said to be good areas of longevity. Could this not make a good museum exhibit? A good lesson of geography or history? Tourism? Lessons of good living could include: food, water, air, pastime, a way of getting rid of the stress which so many people talk about; and I believe the new century will not mean giving up what we have been doing in order to start afresh. But maybe – given the enormous competition for everything – we will have to rethink our new strategies.

Concerning governance I have quite often heard reports on the radio/TV or seen articles in the press on the election results of such and such a country. I do not recall reading about museums as voting centres. Maybe this has happened, I do not know. Since museums often seem to be remembered by the people in power almost as dumping areas, we could perhaps draw the attention of these rulers to the need to keep the used ballot boxes in the museum. In fact, as part of a good system of governance we could even mount exhibits on a country's election, as part of the history of the country. It is true that a lot of museums, particularly those of the newly independent countries, do have exhibitions on the fight for independence. Once the objective is attained the museum is

forgotten. I hope that this idea will grow roots in some of our museums in the new century.

On governance again, it is a common secret that corruption, or almost institutionalised corruption, is one of the reasons why many of our countries have not developed fast enough. Museums, I believe, could take on the role of informing the public on such malpractices which make our countries poorer by not being able to fully benefit from those big loans, grants, etc., from the richer donor or lending countries or institutions. How can the museum play this role? Simply by mounting good exhibitions, for example on a country's natural resources, the fight against poverty, and the use of outside assistance obtained. Such exhibits could be changed, say, every five years.

Democracy is, it seems to me, a word which is little understood by the majority of our people. It is associated with the right to elect our leaders to public office, without undue influence. Nevertheless, we are quite aware of a lot of things which go on in this so-called democratic process. We all know that the process is supposed to be genuine, but is tainted by the buying of voters, etc. Is it not true that both words, museum and democracy, were invented by the Greeks? Is it not true that until now museums have played no active role in the democratic process of the countries where they are referred to as "National Museums"? In the case of a National Museum to which a wing was added at Independence, it would seem necessary to attract the attention of the leaders - or the new leaders in case of an illegitimate change of government - to the need to respect democratic principles. This, I strongly believe, should be one of the roles of museums in the 21st Century.

Finally we have to find a way of convincing governments to invest in the museum, an institution which is very often taken for granted as part and parcel of the government machinery, but which always finds it difficult to make ends meet.

I thank you for your attention.