

Museums and the Promotion of Peaceful Coexistence and Democratic Governance: Challenges for the 21st Century

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As the twentieth century draws to a close, world peace, democracy and good governance are being threatened on a number of accounts and in a number of countries: what measures have museums to take on this score? What programmes should we undertake to bring about sustainable change from the culture of war to the culture of peace, democracy and good governance? As museum professionals, what should we base our action on?

The threat to peace, democracy and good governance has been intensifying over the past few years. Unfortunately, for some countries this is a daily experience. Communities and groups world wide are struggling with differences that resist ordinary discussion, solution and change. The conflicts experienced in countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America this decade no doubt explain this state of affairs. This disturbing situation has spurred some institutions and organisations like the United Nations, NATO, OAU and the Commonwealth to begin to take some radical decisions and measures to deal with the problem. The efforts of these institutions and organisations in finding solutions to some of these conflicts and armed strife in recent years demonstrate a new skill in resolving conflicts.

However, while remarkable progress has been achieved in enthroning peace and democratic governance in countries like South Africa, the Philippines, El Salvador and Mozambique, new challenges to peace and democracy are emerging in Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Republic of Congo, Angola, etc. These conflicts have erupted in reaction to earlier oppression or repression and due to suspicion, intolerance and hatred built up over the years. In the face of this new global threat how can museums play a leading role in promoting sustainable peaceful coexistence and democratic governance?

The deep and vested differences that separate groups in the modern world and the deep need to understand that diversity and build new structures from it should be museums' new strategy towards achieving global peaceful coexistence and democratic governance in the next millennium. Increased co-operation, trust and reciprocity are needed to address the challenges facing us today. In fact, E. C. Osborn says "a deeper understanding between peoples should assist in lessening tensions which ultimately flare into international conflicts. Presentation of the visual arts, the handicrafts, architecture, civic planning, scientific discoveries and achievements, the history of different countries offer a means of better understanding the aspirations, customs and character of different peoples."¹

¹"Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century." Commonwealth Association of Museums, Triennial Conference, Barbados, May 5-12, 1999. Papers

Understanding issues of diversity, identity, intergroup conflict and co-operation by investigating intercultural relationships, transnational attitudes, values and beliefs, will help museums take action that will foster peaceful coexistence and democratic governance in the 21st century world wide. Without such understanding, action across communities, groups and countries may be difficult if not impossible.

Museums are institutions devoted to preservation, research and education. Museums can use culture to mirror and understand diversity in history, morals, institutions and attitudes, social trends, clashes and conflicts as well as political power struggles within and abroad since “culture links one individual to another and allows each person to develop.”² This is quite relevant because culture defines humankind’s relationship with nature and the physical environment, including how people express their attitudes and beliefs about other forms of life. The United Nations’ World Commission on Culture and Development realised the relevant role culture can play in various aspects of human development, including peaceful coexistence and democratic governance, and decided to place culture to the centre of development. This was done to ensure that any success recorded in development will be sustainable since it will be based on the people’s way of life – culture.

Once differences amongst communities, groups and countries are understood, structures which will provide and support bridges across divides of culture, class, ethnicity, generations and tradition can be built for a new civil society that is peaceful, democratic and well governed. Museums can use scholarship in the humanities to clarify issues of diversity, identity, intergroup conflict and co-operation. This will require museum professionals or scholars to carry out investigative studies on these issues. The museums can also use the arts to offer new and clear perspectives on contemporary life and re-imagine the presumptions on which current passions, convictions and actions are based. With a clear understanding of the differences that exist amongst communities, groups and countries, museums can then undertake to implement programmes that will promote peaceful coexistence and democratic governance. Such programmes will include the use of exhibitions, performing artists, film and video makers and directors, etc., to illuminate community or group differences, similarities and their relationship to each other, and from it build a culture of peace, harmony, tolerance and democracy.

Exhibitions

Exhibitions mounted in and by museums in the 21st century should not be such that “hoards of people parade dutifully past objects usually unrelated to anything outside the museum.”³

Exhibitions which will promote peace, democracy and good governance should be multi-media exhibitions assembled in collaboration with members of the community and consisting of slides and televised scenes of events that can deter conflict, inspire peace and encourage democratic governance. Such exhibitions should not be localised in one city, community or country but be mobile or travelling exhibitions that can reach a wide

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and varied public. Exhibitions which bring to light cultural objects that depict peace and unity, that highlight inter-ethnic relationships, televised and photographic scenes that bring to the fore causes of conflicts and their resolution, histories of governments of yesterday and today along with their actions or decisions which might have enhanced or hindered democracy and good governance, should be the focus of museums in the 21st century. For such exhibitions to promote peaceful coexistence and democratic governance, they must be carefully articulated multimedia packages that capture the attention and interest of the viewers. They must be planned and publicised with the greatest thoroughness. It is also worthwhile to arrange such exhibitions in conjunction with a particular event. Recently in Kenya and Nigeria, exhibitions on peace and reconciliation, and on power, democracy and governance have been mounted in museums. This is a positive step.

Performing arts

Inter-disciplinarity and working in groups is the progress of today which should be carried into the 21st century. Museums can work in collaboration with performing artists to highlight issues that will promote peaceful coexistence and democratic governance. This will require museums and performing artists to plan and execute drama and plays that will stimulate and inspire peace, democracy and good governance in communities and countries. The dramatic plays should constructively critique societal and governmental actions that have hindered peace and democracy.

Film and video

There are many good films and videos on the history of countries, kingdoms, national and international conflicts and contemporary life of societies. The films museums could show should be of educative value and related to the issue that they want to promote. Some of these films and videos may be too expensive for some museums to hire. However, there is always a solution to a problem.

When planning a film and video programme, there are three chief sources. First, films may be hired from commercial film and video-producing firms. Secondly, where this is expensive or not possible, there are international organisations like UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, foreign countries and trade associations which produce films and videos for free showing. Many of these films and videos are really first-rate, and can be used by museums to draw public attention to issues that will help promote a peaceful civil society. Thirdly, there are some good amateur film and video makers' associations in several towns or countries which may be willing and ready to lend films and videos to museums. Such films and videos may have tremendous local interest and attraction. For example, in Nigeria film and video makers are producing and distributing films and videos that aim to correct wrong and harmful societal practices against the family, women and children, as well as bad governance. Such films and videos attract large viewership

and are gradually making positive impact on the lives of the people and the government. Thus, the public showing of films can be made a very attractive and educative programme, especially for schools and colleges. It can draw in a wide and varied public, and can inspire in many a great and positive desire to uphold the principles of peaceful coexistence and democratic governance.

For museums to successfully implement the programmes outlined here, they will need to take some specific and concrete actions, not only to get the funds needed to implement them but also to reach the right audience. Museums should organise special days or programmes and involve their country's minister of information and culture, and as the case may be, invite members of parliament and no one else – a day exclusively for them. The programme or special day, which can be a multimedia exhibition, should dwell on issues and scenes that will inspire peace, democracy and good governance. If members of the parliament are taken round, get interested and know what museums are for, the museums can get the sympathy of parliament. Ultimately parliament controls a country. With their sympathy museums can not only get more money and support, but will also inspire in them the willpower to build and encourage structures that will sustain peaceful coexistence and democratic governance. Heads or representatives of intergovernmental organisations, community and group leaders are another important audience the museums should endeavour to reach with their programmes for peace and democratic governance. This is because the decision to change the culture of war to the culture of peace rests with the parliament, the cabinet, community and group leaders. If museums can help them embrace dialogue, mediation, negotiation and imagination – not force, then a culture of war can be changed to a culture of peace in which democracy and good governance will thrive. “Conflict is not inevitable,” says Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, and “Learning to live together means daring to share, daring to do things differently, daring to dream of a better, safer, more just and humane world. It also means having the resolve and courage to transform our dreams into reality.”⁴

If we, as representatives of the museum profession, are to build a more peaceful and democratic society in the mind of the public, let us start immediately to indoctrinate everyone, from the oldest to the youngest; and if we concentrate our attention on any age group, let us make that group the children, for today's children are tomorrow's adults and world leaders. Moreover, if we are to succeed in this new challenge, we must be before the public and children *constantly* with sound programmes of one sort or another about peace, democracy and good governance.

Conclusion

If museums are to make breakthroughs in promoting peaceful coexistence and democratic governance, they will need the co-operation and active involvement of those with financial resources and influence - a partnership for action. The World Bank, United Nations, United Nations Commission for Culture and Development, United Nations Development Programme, the Commonwealth and Foundations will have to support

museums and work out concrete collaboration programmes that will encourage and strengthen peaceful coexistence, democracy and good governance globally. This is relevant, because the challenge of promoting peaceful coexistence and democratic governance is so broad and far reaching that it can only be achieved if it becomes a universal responsibility. Museums can play a pivotal role by using the collections and expertise they have to develop programmes that will draw attention and support of governments, parliaments, intergovernmental organisations, community leaders and the media. Attention can be called to issues that will eliminate prejudices, encourage tolerance, harmony and stimulate the building of structures that will help create decent living conditions, where every citizen throughout the world will find new openings to progress and to the overall betterment of human societies.

Notes

¹ E. C. Osborn, *Museums and Monuments Series*, Vol. V, 1953.

² Javier Perez De Cuellar, *ICOM News, Special Issue*, 1996, p. 11.

³ John B. High Tower, *Curator*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1969, p. 13.

⁴ Federico Mayor, *The UNESCO Courier*, October 1998, p. 9.