Museums And Communities As Seen In The Profession - And In The History Of ICME

By

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This year's annual meeting of ICME addresses different issues and aspects relating to museum-community relationships. This topic has implicitly been at the heart of the work of ethnographic museums in different forms. Afterall one of the goals of each ethnographic museum has been to document communities for presentation within the context of the museum. In the many years that anthropologists and others have embarked on collecting material evidence from a variety of communities, the way in which it has been publicly presented has changed, going from interpretation by the researcher – most often an outsider – to intense consultation with members of the community, to actual investment in community members to create collections and exhibits.

My comments herein serve solely to reflect upon these changes in approach. These comments are drawn from over 30 years of privileged experience working in museums with communities. From the onset, I was faced with working with communities which had been poorly represented, if at all, in most museums. In creating collections, education programs and exhibitions my situations put me face-to-face with community members as I sought for guidance in presentation of their heritage. I cut my teeth, as they say, working with immigrant communities in Cleveland, Ohio, one of the northern industrial centers of the United States in the late 1970s. Our collecting efforts were groundbreaking in terms of documenting traditional culture in ethnic communities as our public programs set the pace for working in consultation with our community scholars.

Three years in the trenches served as guidance more than 15 years later when I found myself in several situations of working with Native American people in the context of

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the museum. Again, the concerns and needs of these peoples whose cultural traditions I was charged with putting forward to the public was foremost in what found its way into each museum. In the small town of Okmulgee, Oklahoma, the Creek Council House went through a massive restoration to save the historic structure seated on the town square. Built in 1878, the building's original use was as the seat of government for the forcibly removed Muscogee Creek Nation. With statehood in 1907, it was transferred to city hands and served many functions before becoming the municipal museum. In designing the exhibits for the newly restored building, I worked closely with representatives of the Creek Nation as a sign of respect and a means to get their involvement in a building that initially served them.

Again, I worked with tribal representatives on developing the archeology and anthropology exhibits of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at the University of Oklahoma. These individuals served on the planning committee which informed the exhibit designers about the content of each of the exhibits. Lengthy discussions, often over a home-cooked meal, resulted in exhibits that addressed topics of significance to our consultants.

The ICME resolution concerning Museums and Communities of 1995 was sandwiched by two significant efforts to draw attention to the need to work with communities. Chaotic political conflict which was resulting in the wanton destruction of cultural heritage was the impetus of that resolution. In Stavanger, emotionally motivated ICME members felt the need to put in writing their intense feelings of the need to actively protect these valuable aspects of heritage in their communities.

We can step not too terribly far back to 1988 and 1990 when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. convened two conferences funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Each of the conferences addressed the presentation and interpretation of cultural diversity in museums. The first addressed The Poetics and Politics of Representation and the second was entitled Museums and Communities. They both resulted in thick volumes of the collected papers by museum professionals and others which today serve as textbooks in many classrooms.[1]

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[1] See Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, Exhibiting Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991 and Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine, Museums and Communities, The Politics of Public Culture, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992.

Then we move forward to 2002, when as an initiative of the American Association of Museums, the publication – Mastering Civic Engagement, A Challenge to Museums - was published.[2] This work is the resulting of a 1998 initiative "to explore the potential for dynamic engagement between American communities and their museums."   It involved a national task force, six community dialogues at locations across the county, and continuing conversations between community leaders and the museum field. This work considered museums as "places of dialogue, advocates of inclusion, places of value and incubators of community." This work not only looks at the process of inclusion as a means of community engagement, it serves as a model which individual museums can mold to meet their needs in working with community.

With these comments as a reminder of what has come before, in actually not the too distant past, perhaps we can listen to the experiences and recommendations of our colleagues in the next few days as we consider this multivaried topic and how ethnographic museums and communities can continue developing long-lasting relationships.

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[2] See Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums, Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2002. See also Kinshasha Holman Conwill and Alexandra Marmion Roosa, "Cultivating Community Connections," Museum News, May/June 2003.