

ACADEMIA | Letters

Recognizing Museums for their achievements in innovation and public quality, as well as their commitment to excellence in their human values.

Georgios Spyropoulos

At this time of heightened need across all sections of society, Museums as inter- and transnational organizations, face particular challenges in the current situation. However, as many countries around the world start to leave lockdown and to open up museums, although still unable to host visits, our commitment to furthering the quest of museums to serve communities locally and globally in ever innovative ways, seems more relevant than ever. I have personally broadened my appreciation and respect for Museums, first for the incredible effort put by their staff in promoting excellence in innovation and public quality in museum practice and for their work within an overall framework of a commitment to citizenship, democracy and human rights, to bridging cultures and social and political borders, and to sustainability.

In my opinion, Museums as inter- and transnational “Monuments” speak louder through their very forms and collections than a concise and lucidly written catalogue might. Surprisingly enough much more attention has been focused on the exhibits, the aesthetic and academic level the Museum’s staff strive to achieve in their galleries than on the interaction between work of art and viewer in the “Museum World”; and even though Museum guides begin by exhorting the viewer to recognize that the architecture of the Museums is, from first to last, an art of shaping space around human beings, and even though scholars of ancient art and architecture admit movement within sculpture, or eccentricities in architectural form,¹ they rarely afford a work of art an active role in manipulating a viewer or visitor. I believe that Museums should have an increasingly compelling tendency to touch upon a broad array

¹Brown 1980; Brown, Richardson E. H. and Richardson L. 1993; Davies 2004; Spyropoulos 2016 (forthcoming).

of aspects of culture and eventually maneuver a visitor in specific directions through their permanent collections and exhibitions. The visitor's mental and physical participation in a scripted dialogue with the works of art on display, not only assures heightened interest in the forms and design principles of the various exhibits and the structures that host them, it also adds the benefit of discussing complex scholarly disputes in a manner that the non-specialist will probably follow with ease. The architectural elaboration of these structures, the lines of vision and approaches that exposed them to view, the paths their complex galleries formed for visitors to walk, must all be picked out with skill and presented with care in each Museum. As already mentioned, Museums represent a set of core values around innovation, commitment to citizenship, cultural diversity, cultural democracy and sustainability. Presentations, exhibitions, awards within the Museum scheme, but mostly highly structured judging processes and criteria emphasize different aspects and dimensions of these values. These are:

Transforming future Cultural Collaboration, that will aim to bring radical change to the Museum and Heritage and enable it to fulfill its potential to trigger sustainable cultural, social, "economic development", and respond to the challenges and opportunities of a new era.

Audience engagement. This could include digital skills, local community engagement, education programs and volunteer management.

Developing Exhibitions and Cultural Events. This could include methods of "activating" and promoting collections, exhibitions and cultural events, organizing and managing traveling exhibitions and cultural events—film festivals, conferences, theaters. Cultural events will contribute to the creation of an empowered national network of heritage professionals, articulate clear arguments and raise awareness of the value of heritage in cultural, social, "economic" and "environmental" development, and provide advocacy for the sector to influence national, regional and local policies.

Vision and Mission, that is the necessity to intensify cultural exchanges and to promote mutual attendance to major cultural events. All this will prove instrumental in forging new understandings and partnerships and eventually signal a fruitful collaboration with other Museums and Institutions. The program must offer both organizations and individuals the support and tools to test out new ways of working, become more central to their communities, and eventually adopt a more collaborative, entrepreneurial approach in order to bring back positive change to society.

Involvement of Local Community, the aim being to strongly encourage the local community to enthusiastically embrace the Museum Galleries through a variety of interactive activities, tours and educational programs. "In Touch with Antiquity", f. ex., would enable students to find out in this multisensory session exploring vases, sculptures and works of art in general. By allowing students, not only to look, but also examine and touch the various exhibits, we

will help them find out how archaeologists and art historians gain important information from even small pieces of a broken f. ex. vessel, identify vase shapes and the different painting techniques employed by artists. In view of the fact that in ancient art, faces but also hand gestures often signaled a person's emotions and intentions, and divinities were usually identifiable by symbols held in their hands, "Drawing from Antiquity", by means of sketching from ancient works by drawing from the Museum's collection and sights, is a project, the fruition of which Museums should place emphasis on. Spotlight tours by means of an immersive dive into the collection with an approximately 20-minute gallery discussion devoted to one work of art, Garden and Collection Highlights tour are strongly recommended.

Global Perspective-Technology, that is Developing Exhibitions, Cultural Events and Educational Programs. Cultural Events that will be enthusiastically received and critically acclaimed as an unprecedented opportunity to view the cultural heritage of countries around the world, will be eventually widely praised as a major contribution to civilization and scholarship. All the above should be supplemented by an array of programs that will include lectures, panel discussions and performances, public symposium, concerts and documentary film series on ancient art and culture. In regard to Technology, the Museum's operation must comply with all criteria for themes, fields of action and technology (Network). The goals and objectives of the network, such as the raise of the public awareness on the cultural heritage, the promotion of research and education through cultural exchanges, the promotion of cultural tourism and collaboration among different countries could be well elaborated and achieved through many Cultural Route's activities. Additionally, the visibility of the Network on the internet must be improved. For this reason, the use of the Museum logo is recommended for all Network members. Furthermore, a stronger presence in the social media is advised to raise awareness of the Route and improve its visibility.

Scripted Dialogue with the Monuments-Appropriation and Synthesis. The visitors' mental and physical participation in a scripted dialogue with the monuments and works of art on display (see above) appears to be what generates their self-reflexive, playful, creative and multifarious approach to cultural production, that is both *Intertextual*²; and by intertextual I mean that it is loaded with cultural baggage from the past, but its interaction with the material is never neutral. In other words the past impacts on the present by acting as an impetus, model and competitor and as such one is necessarily connected simultaneously to both the past and the present; by intermedial I mean that the great genius that stood behind these achievements plays with different media of commemoration to mark indelibly the cultural landscape and the extension of this-present day-through both literature and physical structures. It is this ambiguous relation to time, the temporal slipperiness and playfulness with

²Strazdins 2012; Spyropoulos 2017.

cultural history and record, and the way monuments are used to muse on the construction and preservation of identity that viewers are invited to explore.

Appropriation and Synthesis. Robert Nelson provides a valuable discussion of appropriation in art and the re-use of visual ideas from one time and place to another. He notes that, above all, this is not a neutral process: “appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, subjective, and motivated.”³ This means that analyzing appropriations requires looking not only at the movement of artistic ideas, but asking why certain forms or motifs were taken up for a new purpose, what happened to them in that transformation, and what resonance and significance they had in their new settings. In considering the visual semantic program of a Museum, these questions must be considered. What does the varied, eclectic composition of the Museum’s architecture and decorative program mean? The profile of the Museum’s collections must be allusive, integrated, and synthetic, but also direct in its visual appropriations. Its synthesis of past styles and the range of its allusions must be deliberate and meaningful, and not simply reflect popular ideas in circulation. It would therefore be revealing to consider the Museum’s collection in terms of key themes that relate to cultural appropriations: active selection, distortion of meaning, and semantic workings that draw on material from a range of times in the past to create a synthesis in the present and explicitness about its own processes.

All the above mentioned criteria ensure the ability to discern professional quality, innovation and creativity, represent and emphasize different aspects and dimensions of a set of core values around innovation, cultural diversity, cultural democracy and cultural participation. They are “occasions” in which these values are continuously discussed, renewed, reinterpreted, refreshed.⁴

³Farlow 2016 with the relevant bibliography; Spyropoulos 2021(forthcoming).

⁴Jette Sandahl, ICOM and Chair of the European Museum Forum said:“...These values guide the judging and award process, and our annual conferences are occasions in which these values are continuously discussed, renewed, reinterpreted, refreshed.”

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Prof. Dr Georgios Spyropoulos.

M.A., King's College London

PhD, Philipps Universitaet Marburg, Germany

Academic Associate, Ioannou Center for

Classical and Byzantine Studies,

University of Oxford

Research Associate, The Getty,

Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities

Research Associate, University of Princeton

Head of Department of Prehistoric, Classical Antiquities and Museums of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Corinth.

Deputy Director of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Corinth.

Professor (Professori Visitationi Didattica),

University of Sapienza, Rome

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