

Scholarly Symbiosis

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As defined by ICOM, a museum is a *permanent institution in the service of society and its development*. This principle articulates the essential relationship between scholarship and populism in the museum context, and is strongly echoed by *Code of Ethics for Museums*, recently published by the UKMA. Predicated on the expectations society has of museums, this code reflects the statistically supported belief that museums are popular places to be. Emphasising that museums are focussed on public service, the code reminds us that *Museums belong to everybody. They exist to serve the public. They should enhance the quality of life for everyone, both today and in the future.*

Does it follow from this that the dichotomy between scholarship and populism is merely apparent? Well, yes and no! *Populism* may carry pejorative connotations of vulgarity, at variance with the concept of high standards and quality to be expected of a museum. However, in its definition of the term, Chambers' Dictionary couples it with *populist*, and explains:

In US, a member of the Peoples' Party, founded in 1891, advocating public ownership of public services..... One who believes in the ability of the common people to play a major part in governing themselves..... Appealing to the mass of the people.

It is interesting that this definition helps to emphasise that the concept of a *populist* museum, may be directly highly charged in political terms, an issue that may be of growing importance in the context of increasing decentralisation and devolved responsibility for government within the United Kingdom, and of immediate relevance in Northern Ireland. This helps to highlight the essential role of careful, rigorous scholarship in a populist organisation rather than to imply any tension between the two concepts. It appears that the tension, where it exists, is between populism and elitism.

While it may seem a digression to consider this opposition, it may be useful to pursue it a little further in the context of the (Platonic) Museum, scholarship and the presentation of objects. Tony Bennett refers in his book, *The Birth of the Museum to the cracked looking glass of the dominant culture*, challenging us to consider *the rhetoric governing the processes through which objects have been configured into particular display(s)* and pointing out that *the questions of how things get displayed in museums cannot be divorced from questions concerning the training of curators, or the structures of museum control and management*. Bennett suggests that these questions are also intimately connected to class, with great honesty contrasting his own philosophy of museum experience with that described by Dillon Ripley, for whom there was (Bennett writes)

No essential difference between the learning environment and the one of fun and games: one should be able to move effortlessly between the two. For a bourgeois boy, such an effortless transition between the museum and a gentrified selection of fairground pleasures would, no doubt, have proved possible. My own experience, and I think it is rather more typical, was different, Part of a cultural itinerary travelled with some reluctance.

While Bennett's personal experience may be more typical of society as a whole, it is valid to ask whether this is equally true for those of us privileged to work in museums. How many of us are surprised to learn that Ripley's is not the more typical response to the museum environment? Two crucial concepts emerge from Bennett's analysis, *the cracked looking glass of the dominant culture* and the desire for the learning environment of the museum to be compatible with *fun and games*, the critical question being, (assuming museum personnel do in fact sign up to the principle): *whose fun and games?* It may readily be demonstrated that the *Code of Ethics for Museums* has considerably advanced the debate on *the cracked looking glass* by articulating both the aim of the museum to *provide something of interest to every potential user* and the need to *respond to the requirements of different cultural groups*. Achieving these aspirations relates directly to the quality of leadership available within the organisation and to the extent to which that organisation is, in fact, values driven.

The question of social class and its relationship to accessibility in the context of museums is not a new issue. The Belfast Museum is one of several examples that might be given to illustrate how this is reflected in museum development during the early nineteenth century. While the Museum was founded in 1822 by and primarily for members of the Belfast Natural History Society, its Committee was keen to ensure that the admission price did not make the museum inaccessible to less affluent members of the local community, and by the 1830s concessions were offered to *mechanics and their children*. In 1845, the museum was opened on Easter Monday, a major holiday, with the express purpose of attracting a working class audience. A nominal admission charge was made, and the museum advertised,

In order to afford the working classes every facility for seeing such a rare specimen as the LIVING CHAMELEON, and for inspecting the otherwise extensive and interesting collection contained in this institution, the Curator will be in attendance on Easter Monday from 9 in the morning till 6 in the afternoon.

Clearly, the relationship between scholarship and populism was not considered controversial one hundred and sixty years ago. The nineteenth century concern to ensure that the working classes had access to museums and their collections reflects a view of the museum as an engine for social change, and Mike Houlihan argues that

The museum is increasingly part of a wider apparatus within society, working towards social transformation. Museum collections are a gateway to understanding how other people live and uniquely view their world.

How you interpret those collections can have an affective influence upon our society and the future.

Providing a learning environment compatible with *fun and games* echoes Charles Handy's aspiration that a system of education should provide *golden seeds*, which he explains as opportunities *for exploring our values and beliefs about life and society, ... a more exciting curriculum than one packed full of facts*. This aspiration is equally valid in the extended, and, ideally, widely accessible, education system represented by the Museum in all the variety and diversity encompassed by the Platonic ideal of the institution.

This may provide many challenges for the curator/scholar, and in this context I would like to cite MAGNI's *Imagine Habitas* exhibition as an interesting example of how to rise to these challenges. Ironically, *Imagine Habitas* reinvents the concept of the Cabinet of Curiosities, the difference being that instead of assuming a given level of knowledge on the part of the already informed and therefore presumed elite audience, this exhibition stimulates exploration and curiosity. Drawers open to reveal a huge range of specimens relating to the natural world and sciences, while adjacent are books and computers enabling visitors to discover more for themselves irrespective of existing levels of knowledge, level of interest or preferred approach. Rather than challenging the authority of the curator, this exhibition relies on a high level of curatorial expertise, on imaginative and informed approaches to the selection of material and on the capacity to trust the visitor to devise a personally tailored response to the exhibition. *Imagine Habitas* is extremely successful and very popular with visitors.

This approach relates directly to the question raised in 1970 by Alma Whittlin, who posed the question *Are museums moving towards a more humanistic attitude?* in her book *Museums: in Search of a Usable Future*, in which she comments,

There is still a reserved attitude on the part of museum officers towards the general public, particularly in Germany and in England, but in hardly any part of Europe would a curator find it politic to say 'if the public at large took to visiting museums, it would be the end of everything', as a French curator was reported to have said in 1940.

Can we, in all honesty, think of *no* curator anywhere in Ireland who, in 1970, would have been prepared to express such a sentiment openly? I began my museum career in the mid 70s, when I heard exactly this sort of opinion openly expressed on numerous occasions, and I have frequently heard it since, not always tongue in cheek. It may be more important that I have very recently heard such a sentiment attributed by museum professionals to certain curators, so that even if the attitude has disappeared, it seems we need honestly to face and find ways to deal with the fact that the perception still persists.

In respect of providing a creative educational milieu, Handy's concept of *golden seeds* may interestingly be applied to the controversial issue of the increasingly high level of results achieved by pupils taking public examinations in Northern Ireland, and to the debate over whether this reflects a decline in standards expected rather than an actual improvement in performance. A generation ago,

it was believed to be impossible for a candidate taking an examination in an arts subject to achieve 100%, and I recall as a young and particularly idealistic teacher thinking it unfair that this should be the case, and wishing that mechanisms could be developed to assess an argument expressed with both logic and creativity so that these capacities could be measured in much the way that is applied, for example, to mathematical method. Nowadays, it is possible, although it may be rare, for students in subjects such as English literature to achieve such results and to do so consistently through a variety of publicly assessed systems. I believe that this change does not reflect any reduction in the standards required, but rather that it represents an increased sophistication in the approach taken to creativity, in other words, that a clearly expressed, logical and creative argument, while it may be neither right nor wrong, may be judged within itself to approach perfection according to an agreed and recognised set of criteria. In terms of government agendas that aspire to be led by the desire to foster creativity, which carry with them an attendant demand to support the development of personal confidence within the individual, such a change in attitude is clearly valuable. In terms of the educational opportunities that may be provided by the Museum, there may also be great value in emulating the levels of maturity and flexibility that I believe to characterise this change in approach. Far from *dumbing down*, this will actually result in placing greater demands on the knowledge and judgement of the professional museum scholar, in order to help maximise the provision of opportunities for creative experiences. It will also demand high levels of co operation and communication between scholars and museum professionals whose expertise lies in education, marketing and other areas, and will require us increasingly to pay attention *to the views of learners and teachers*, for, as Des Griffin has recently pointed out, we often seriously underestimate the capacity of our visitors and the potential of young people. As Griffin reminds us *The behaviour and ability of children (including those) from lower socio-economic backgrounds, is astounding*, illustrating his point with the example of the speed with which *kids from the slums of Indian cities taught themselves to be computer literate through incidental and peer to peer learning*.

Within the Museum, there may be cases in which Leaders are faced with the challenge of helping to build the confidence of the scholar, assisting in achieving an understanding that to share knowledge in an accessible way is to add to, rather than to undervalue or undermine, scholarly authority. There may also be cases in which the scholar will need high levels of courageous honesty. In a book published last year, management research guru Jim Collins argues that a *stop doing* list is as important, indeed more important, than a *to do* list. This book, *Good to Great*, puts forward the case for *an organisational culture of discipline*, one that is clearly focussed and that has a good understanding of the implications of the paradox *less is more* for the achievement of high quality results. In fact, Collins refers quite bluntly, with a trans Atlantic directness that may even jar a little, to the value of *a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk*. The MAGNI Vision Statement, with its clear focus on defined Programme areas, is, I contend, a good example of a mechanism designed to achieve an organisational culture of discipline as described by Collins. A major element in the achievement of the Vision is ensuring that all scholarship conducted within the organisation is clearly aligned to defined Programme areas, providing intellectual discipline for the organisation as a whole. This may occasionally demand that scholars take some decisions that may be quite painful. Part of this process may be an examination of the degree to which the concept of *scholarship* embraces issues not of knowledgeable authority, but of elitism. Populism implies no challenge to the curator's capacity for academic rigour, to conduct research or be an authority in terms of scholarship and knowledge, but

there are likely to be cases in which scholars face tension between populism and elitism.

The word *elite* itself carries several nuances of meaning, for example, *Collins' Dictionary* gives *the most powerful, rich or gifted members of a group* while *Chambers* provides *a chosen or select part, the pick or flower of anything*. Throughout their history, museums have been associated with elites, carrying concepts of prestige, and some, art museums for example, tend to be run, or at least to be perceived as being run, by and for elites. Agendas that seek to promote social inclusion demand that the tension between access for all and the tendency towards the exclusive be addressed, and in this context, the concept of *flowering* is particularly useful. As we settle into the twenty first century, the issue for museums is to maintain the high standards and quality that help to promote and sustain creativity, thus contributing to the process of *flowering*, fostering this at a variety of levels of interest and competency. I do not wish to create a false impression that perceived *elites* should be unwelcome in the *humanised* or *populist* Museum, but instead would argue that to cater to elites constitutes an aspect of the diversity of museum based activities. If the Museum is to fulfil the potential to be a place in which everyone may find opportunities for life enhancement, then it is essential that specialist researchers and interest groups can be accommodated, stimulated and challenged in environments that will not be generally inimical to the less initiated. This may be to risk pleasing no one all of the time by attempting to be all things to all people, but once again, the *Code of Ethics for Museums* offers clear advice: *Reflect differing views, striking a balance over time. Cultivate a variety of perspectives on the collections*. This can only be achieved if there is clarity of vision and purpose accompanied by depth of knowledge resulting from rigorous, collections based scholarship. Unless museum work is securely grounded in sound, relevant scholarship that has the capacity to embrace an empathetic awareness of the potentialities of the meanings that objects may carry, it will not be possible to provide valuable experiences for visitors.

Increased emphasis on consultation and the growing willingness on the part of museums to interact with communities make a major contribution to the intellectual shape of the populist organisation. Museums are also well aware of the relevance of management theory, training and skills to achieving high quality results. It is likely that the rigorous challenges facing museums will best be met in an empowered culture of discipline. More than thirty years ago, Wittlin addressed this issue in the museum context, recognising that

A single line of authority from income top down is obsolete in any kind of organisation, and every organisation has to create its own specific and most fruitful lines of interaction.

It seems that in the intervening period, this has not always been easy to achieve in organisations of any sort. Writing in 1996, Harmon emphasised *It is pointless to preach empowerment when the structures continue to give supervisors tight control*, which suggests that it is less than straightforward to create or to foster interactive, empowered organisations. Jim Collins' argument in favour of *cultures of discipline* illustrates that these are the exception rather than the rule, and that they are highly dependant on particularly effective individuals whom he identifies as *Level Five Leaders*. His analysis of their characteristics shows that these are people whose ambition, while strong, is geared towards ensuring the success of the organisation rather than to the gratification of the individual ego,

and who will create *tremendous opportunities* for people, and ultimately, through them, for the truth, to be heard. Collins explains that throughout an organisation

When you have disciplined people you don't need bureaucracy, when you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive controls. When you combine a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship, you get the magical alchemy of a great performance.

In the museum context, *the ethic of entrepreneurship* is directly related to if not in some respects synonymous with the cultivation of disciplined populism.

In his lecture, *Entrepreneurship in the Arts: Entrepreneurship in Museums*, delivered earlier this year, Des Griffin argues that entrepreneurship is *driven by recognisable market need* (for which, he tells us, we may substitute *visitors, community, even curiosity*, if we think this concept too commercial.) Like others writing on how best to cater for this need, he reminds us

Unnecessary hierarchies of control stifle innovation: autonomy, information exchange, nurturing of creative and educational opportunities all encourage it..... we must recognise that museums can learn much from other people and organisations. Those who make decisions about our museums should exhibit the same degree of rigour in their decision making and their requirements for information that they demand in their own disciplines and working lives, in some cases a great deal more.

Above all, Griffin emphasises the need for high quality: entrepreneurship is not, or at least, not *simply* about being more commercial, or about costing less to government, rather it centres on *the enhancement of the visitors' experience of interaction with the authentic object and the (consequent) increase in understanding and knowledge.*

For a culture of this sort to flourish in a museum, it is clear that personal discipline is essential. With this discipline comes respect for the self and also for others, and consequently an atmosphere of increasing trust and interdependence. While sound, relevant scholarship is the bedrock of museum activity, a host of well informed individuals with differing types of expertise, including fundraisers, educators, designers, conservators, interpreters and others, are essential to ensuring that scholarship reaches the widest audiences. In order to contribute to the full, it is essential that the nature and importance of all of these skills is fully understood and mutually respected. Bennett's *cracked looking glass* is as out of place here, in the realm of museum management as it is in the museum gallery, if the aims of the democratised, empowered, entrepreneurial, *populist* museum are to be realised.

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