

INFORMAL AND FORMAL EDUCATION IN MUSEUMS

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The role of museums has changed in time, from supporter of national development, to scientist, to educator, to political activist, to community advocate, to entertainer etc. In fact all these functions are still present, and will probably always be part of the public philosophy and activity of any museum. It is the role of each museum mission to state clearly which is the main purpose of its organization. Nevertheless the educational function never ceased to be one of the most important, no matter the type of museum or the richness of its collections. One of the main goals of any museum is to educate its public, the community it serves, especially in topics related to the nature of its collections, but not restricted to them. Interdisciplinary education has also become a goal for many museums.

The increasing importance of the educational role of the museum, as well as the diversification of the means used to reach it, are primarily reflected in various activities of museums (i.e. increased number and importance of educational or public programs for different audiences, related to all the exhibitions, permanent or temporary). Secondly the literature in the field seems to also increase in terms of number of books and other publications, as well as in terms of diversification of points of view reflected (e.g. curator's, educator's, of different segments of the public, of the community a museum is serving etc.) The topics analysed are also diverse: educational importance of museums, interpreting collections, impact on audiences, planning exhibitions and educational programs, and others.

In Romania, both theory and practice are poor. Just a few positive examples could be given. All of them are national or county museums, with large collections, a good visitation rate, and broader contacts with museums and professionals abroad, museums located mainly in Bucharest, but also in Sibiu, Ploiești, Brașov, Zalău, Tulcea, Brăila or Cluj Napoca. Some smaller and dynamic museums are also to be counted, but their educational impact is smaller due to their small audience. In the last years, several museums in other important cities also improved their public activity and educational programs, but numerous wide steps still have to be done. This is almost impossible without a proper conceptual framework in this field because most of the personnel of the Romanian museums have no access to worldwide experience in either theory or practice.

The educational function of museums could be analysed from two main perspectives: from a marketing point of view (taking into account the museum's mission, the efficiency of any public activity, the characteristics and needs of the targeted public, control of outcomes etc.), as well as from the side of the urban communities the museum serves (taking into account the importance of the collections for the local community as well as the socio-cultural significance of the museum's programs).

The topic of education through museums is very important because museums in Romania are publicly recognised as educational (and scientific research) institutions; people visit them mainly for educational

purposes, but the impact in terms of spiritual development and both quantitative and qualitative knowledge development is poor. Most of them lack proper policies regarding their educational role, as well as their discourse and means of relating to their publics. Because of their organization and the improper policies adopted, they do not attract too much public. This fact leads not only to financial problems but also they do not have the cultural and educational role they are supposed to.

The museums in Romania have an ossified attitude regarding their role, way of exhibiting the cultural artefacts they collect as well as transmitting cultural and ethical values. This is due among other factors to inappropriate management and marketing policies, insufficient financial resources, lack of professional training and even experience in this field, bad correlation between museum's message and activities with the interests of the local community. Therefore a new approach of the whole activity in a museum is necessary. A good starting point is better communication, especially through a more suitable and effective discourse, that should also aim implicitly or explicitly educational purposes.

a. The museum discourse

The general mission of a museum is to collect items of cultural value and interpret them, to exhibit the collections and educate the public about them and their cultural context, to contribute to the welfare of the community (Kotler, 1998: 29). The achievement of any museum's mission is therefore tightly related with its exhibitions and the messages it transmits, as well as with

the visitors' needs, expectations, interests and reactions to the museum's discourse.

Designing and promoting the museum discourse should be a central concern. No discourse is innocent because it can influence and transform people. The discourse offers a behavioural context and links to a wider world and a better understanding of life. The museum has a public discourse that addresses in the same time various audiences. Nowadays it is concerned with the interests of the local community and its ultimate role is educational. Reaching the people is achieved only by understanding their needs, as well as the characteristics and trends of the modern discourse in a postmodern society (Bauman, 2000; Roventa-Frumusani, 1999).

The museum discourse is based on the artefacts in its collections. *Museums continually provide meanings to the objects in their care and the way in which the objects are displayed is one of the factors determining which pragmatic effects of the meanings are transferred to the public. Thus museums are not free from value judgments, but they are to large extent normative trendsetters in society. Every form of display of an object rules out other aspects of interpretation, or at least makes them less obvious. Museums do not only conserve objects, they also conserve meanings* (Schouten, 1992: 286). This could make them and their discourse controversial.

The museum discourse has a life of its own and it involves various aspects: political, economic, social, and cultural. The discourse is a growing process, which should be known and at least

partially controlled. A better understanding of the museum discourse implies also to know and to take into account the following aspects: who sends the messages, to whom, when, as well as how. A very important issue is the museum context (building, environment, lighting etc.), which supports the discourse.

In order to be effective when designing and transmitting messages incorporated in a discourse, some principles and rules should be respected. Special interest should be given to presenting, protecting and promoting the local community, being a forum for multiple voices, speech codes or to the issue of political correctness (Steiner, 1995: 129-160). The museum discourse is encoded in the way artefacts are displayed within an exhibition.

There are mainly two views in approaching the way material culture is interpreted in a museum: (1) this is exclusively the business of museum curators; (2) the judgment and interpretation of the exhibits are entirely subjective and they depend on the visitors. In practice both processes should be taken into account. A classical display would have a beginning, a middle and an end; the message is perceived and the experience is complete only after visiting all three parts which are, in most cases, structured chronologically (Pearce, 1987: 182). Any exhibition is judgmental, being based on selection of topics, artefacts, information. This selection has to be based on scientifically proved practices, in order to be as objective as possible. Nevertheless, the selection should be

open to other perspectives, meaning that it should not be restricted to a single voice, but to multiple opinions. The study and exhibiting of material culture have their own insights and perspectives to offer. These are not right or wrong, objectively true or subjectively dubious, except in the crudest sense, but interesting, perceptive and intellectually exciting for any visitor (Pearce, 1987: 183).

Other approaches to exhibitions are thematic and symbolic. The thematic or functional approach aims to exhibit the material culture structured on several topics, more or less independent, that bring new insights making the presentation more complex, reachable and attractive for several segments of visitors. The symbolic approach tries to synthesise as much as possible, presenting significant artefacts with minimal interpretation. This approach aims to let the objects to speak for themselves and gives freedom of interpretation to the visitors. This approach is, in my view, highly controversial. The artefacts belong in most cases to other societies and cultures, they were produced in other places and other times, therefore they are completely foreign to the visitors. Additionally, visitors do not have, in most cases, the necessary knowledge and ability to understand their meanings without some "prompts" and indications. Thus such exhibitions could miss their educational role, inducing only emotional experiences.

The educational role of the museum discourse is a central point when designing an exhibition. It could be reached through multiple ways, in the context of informal education as

well as formal one, having different target publics: children, grown-ups, special groups etc.

b. The informal education in museums

There are several approaches regarding education in the contemporary society, the predominant trend being the constructivist and interpretative learning processes (Steiner, 2001). The museum professionals should know, understand and take them, as well as the characteristics of the public, into account in order to reach the museum's goals. A central issue is the visitor, its needs and desires, experiences and habits, in the context of a museum installation.

Contextual education for children and adults is different. The messages and activities concerning the informal as well as formal education process in a museum have to be tailored according to the aimed audience. Informal and formal education in museums has some similarities and common purposes but they are also different, especially when taking into account the tools they use. In a museum, they have to be in harmony and to lead together to the accomplishment of the museum's mission.

A study at the Science and Technology Centre in Australia pointed out six patterns of learning and interaction of the visitors (Johnson and Reinne, 1995). If we extend the results to museums in general, these statements are as follows: visitors want to have fun and look for this kind of experience; learning is not the main purpose of the visit; the role of the museum is to facilitate the understanding of the exhibits not to teach; learning occurs

when visitors relate experiences in the museum to those in the outside world; analogies facilitate understanding; incidental learning, unrelated to the intention of an exhibit, often occurs. These statements are likely to occur in the case of many types of museums and visitors, but not in every case. Each museum should know and understand the patterns dominant in the case of their visitors.

The support for contextual-informal education is given by the artefacts displayed in permanent or temporary exhibitions. All the exhibits are twice interpreted – once by the curators and the second time by the visitors themselves. Both groups interpret the artefacts no matter their intentions, but some are doing this consciously, others involuntarily.

Curators have an important role in interpreting the collections, in designing and transmitting messages, in guiding the public during the visit etc. (Falk, Dierking: 1997; Lindauer: 2005; Xanthoudaki: 1998; Moscardo: 1999). The curators have to interpret the artefacts because they are out of their initial context and they do not perform anymore the function they were meant to, therefore most of them are meaningless for most of the visitors. Any object should be explained, directly or indirectly. It reflects a certain history, various customs, cultural connotations; it refers to a context that no longer exists (Xanthoudaki, 2003: 23-24).

In most cases, the interpretation of each artefact is presented to the visitors, as an explanation, on a label. Other forms of interpretation are catalogues, books, documentaries etc.

Good labels are hard to write. What are the criteria that make a label “good”? Some criteria refer to its design and style; some others are related with the content of the label. We mention just the most important elements that should be taken into account when designing a label. The first idea taken into account should be that the labels’ role is not informational but educational. A good label is carefully planned in terms of form and content. It does not have to be big, but it has to be large enough to be easy to read and to contain as much information as needed to fulfil its educational role. The fonts and the colours used have to be adequate. The position of the label is also a factor that could influence the rate it is read, as well as how interesting it seems to its readers.

The subject addressed by a label has also to be presented in an interesting manner. Unfortunately most of the Romanian museums, through labels, present only facts related to the artefacts they refer to. They are too technical and visitors are not eager to read them. Of course the scientific data have to be presented, but a label should not limit to it. It puts the artefact in an interdisciplinary context, it reveals a past society, or different beliefs of past or present communities, and it is the result as specific scientific knowledge and way of seeing the humanity. In this way a label is both interesting-attractive and transmits new knowledge, generates ideas i.e. it is educational.

When writing a label, curators have to overcome several difficulties. One of them is that using a specific terminology could induce the idea of

uniformity in time and no variance in space, and it could be also boring for most visitors. On the other hand, the lack of scientific terminology is also not recommended inducing in most cases a lack of precision in presentation and making the understanding of the message inaccurate or even more difficult. In some other situations, using contemporary colloquial vocabulary could lead to easy and distorted perception of the message would generate false impressions and the museum would not fulfil its educational mission. The text has to be scientifically correct and easy to understand and remember.

Another major difficulty of writing a label is the degree to synthesise the scientific research on the artefact and the related topics. The text has to be clear, short, scientifically correct, and interesting. Therefore, it interprets and synthesises a lot of information on the artefact. The degree of freedom that a museum assumes when interpreting collections influences the way visitors perceive that museum and its collections.

Not only the displayed artefacts and the labels associated to them are base for informal education in museums. The same role could have the informal interaction with the personnel of the museum or with the other visitors. Thus the museum should encourage such interactions, exchange of information and experiences. A visitor also learns during various activities, events and happenings organized in the museum. A hybrid form of informal, as well as formal education is the museum theatre.

c. Formal education in museums

Formal education consists in various educational programs, for different audiences (children, families, minorities, foreigners and others). The educational purpose of these activities is explicit and the participants' main goals and sometimes exclusive ones are educational. Children, in general young persons, have been for a long time the main target of these educational programs. In the present, the audience of the formal educational programs has diversified. The museums are places for long-life learning (Soren, 1995), therefore the public programs have adapted to this new situation and to the expectations of the contemporary society.

A research undergone in 1982 by Moore emphasised the steady increase and diversification of museum educational programs all over the world, but especially in the UK and the US. The cooperation with schools increased the educational impact of museums. But the author argues that the cooperation of museum and designers changed the way the visit has been experienced by the visitors. In the same time educational staff became more important. Educational activities took on more variety and embraced all kinds of formal and informal activities, involving a wider range of age-even under-fives (Moore, 1982).

In the last decades, the number and the diversity of educational public programs increased. Suitable and effective programs could be planned only taking into account several humanistic sciences, such as communication, psychology, pedagogy, sociology and museum studies. In this

way, the formal educational programs will address very specifically the behaviour, the interests and the knowledge of the aimed public. In this way, the programs will be easier to understand and more attractive, therefore more effective in terms of educational outcomes.

In Romania museums had close relations with teachers and schools during the communist era. This situation was more or less imposed by the public educational policy. But the relations were limited most of the times at guided tours and sometimes lessons in the galleries. Other forms of educational programs common for large museums were conferences, lectures and presentation of documentaries. Immediately after the fall of the communist regime, the educational programs declined from various reasons: lack of interest of teachers, financial aspects, general economic decline that led to less interest in culture and education etc.

In the last years the situation is changing again, museums assuming more dynamically and attractively their educational role. One of the best examples is the National Museum of Art of Romania. The educational programs offered aim to transform the visit in a pleasant and interesting experience, to make them come back, to determine them to see again a certain exhibition so as to deepen their knowledge and to discover new insights. The programs offered by the above mentioned museum in 2006 are: general and theme guided tours, educational programs for schools and families, special events, contest-tours inside exhibitions, five o'clock visits, cultural rendez-vous

(Jacob, 2005). The diversification and increase of the educational and public programs of the museum have determined the development of the dedicated department in the museum. It also stressed the need of especially trained personnel.

The same phenomenon experienced the "Grigore Antipa" National Museum of Natural History. It used to organise weekly public lectures, guided tours on request and occasional programs for schools. In the last years the educational offer of the museum increased with long-term programs such as the summer entomologic school, "The Sunday meeting" or "The five o'clock guest", and short term programs, associated to different exhibitions or events. No doubt that the same organizational challenges faced all the museums that developed their public and educational programs.

Unique in Romania is the initiative of the ASTRA Museum to publish in its online journal several articles dedicated to education, under the section *Museum is a school*.

Any museum should be a focal point within a community. Its purposes are various and important to the welfare of the society, being the main organizations that preserve and promote its cultural heritage. The role of museums has changed over time. Today they are / should be crucial educational institutions, with an important role in the growing understanding both of the past and present as well as of the otherness. These aims could be reached only through effective communication. Any museum transmits messages to different audiences and receives more

or less structured, answers and other reactions from the public. A better communication, understanding of the messages and reaching of museum's aims including the educational ones, for the benefit of the public, imply a proper museum discourse, both regarding the whole organization and related with each exhibition it mounts, as well as proper educational and public programs.

Despite the importance of a coherent discourse as well as educational role they have, most of the Romanian museums still lack a special policy in these respects. Because of their organization and the improper policies adopted, they do not attract too much public. This fact leads not only to financial problems but also they do not have the cultural and educational role they are supposed to.

With some noticeable exception, most of them placed in the largest towns of the country, the museums in Romania have an old attitude regarding their role, way of exhibiting the cultural artefacts they collect as well as transmitting cultural and ethical values. Some of the reasons for this situation are: inappropriate management and marketing policies, insufficient financial resources, lack of professional training and even experience in this field, bad correlation between museum's message and activities with the interests of the local community. Therefore it is necessary a new approach of the whole activity in a museum. A good starting point is better communication, especially through a more suitable and effective discourse, that should also aim implicitly or explicitly educational purposes.

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