

EMBRACING SOCIAL HARMONY ISSUES IN ROMANIAN MUSEUMS – A FRESH APPROACH

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Since its incipient museum has been the subject of a strong debate about its role and place in the society. Should it be only a place for divertissement, a kind of superior floor on the leisure scale, or a long arm of the educational system, as it was in the Antiquity? Should it become, once again, a temple dedicated to the Muses, or would it be better to be deeply placed in the social problems of today?

Well, if for the public, museums are either a place to be or a place to hate, a storage facility or a school, a boring building or a cheerful one, or, simply, good or bad, for museum specialists, museums are the most complex institutions. Not only “hospitals”, as Richard Grove joked about¹, because a museum should be – as it seems that George Brown Goode (1851 – 1896) used to say – “a house full of ideas”²! Anyway, if we are looking in the ICOM definition, for an institution, to be a museum, it has to be “in the service of society and its development”. It means that the bar was placed very high, because, for a museum, it is not sufficient, anymore, to acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit heritage. The contemporary museum has to have a certain role in the development of the human society.

Saying this, it means that we are offering to museums a great role and that we have great expectancies, because they have to be involved in social programmes, which means, also, sometimes, a kind of political agenda (or, at least, a political perspective on life, society and environment). But this perspective is a rather new one. As Kenneth Hudson have observed, 12 years ago, the museums “exist in order to serve the public. [...] The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation.”³. The

1.. Richard Grove, *Some Problems in Museum Education*, in *Museums and Education*, ed. Eric Larrabee. Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1968, p. 79.

2.. Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence*, Nashville, Tennessee, American Association for State and Local History, 1983, p. 289.

3.. Kenneth Hudson, *The Museum Refuses to Stand Still*, in *Museum International*, no. 197, 1998, p. 43.



beginnings could be detected in several countries, at different moments but, anyway, after the Second World War. Most of it, in the West, this moment could be observed starting with around 1960 and it lasted for at least two decades. In some other countries, in Latin Europe or in Eastern Europe, it started later. However, a major role in making this shift had ICOM, which, already, in 1974, has introduced in its famous definition of museums the reference to the society and its development. More than this, in the last decade, ICOM and its international and national committees and regional alliances have put a stronger accent on the sustainable development of the economy and, as such, of the society¹.

Only 15 years ago, Elaine Heumann Gurian had a strong vision, that “In twenty –five years, museums will no longer be recognizable as they are now known”². Indeed, the process has started and it is continuing to grow³. Museums are changing rapidly their profile and functions, increasing not only in dimension, but, also, in number. The process is quite natural, if we are taking into consideration the fact that the general need to conserve tangible and intangible cultural goods in museums is growing, as the speed of making new goods is growing also⁴, because of the gradual functional degradation caused by physical, technological and psychological obsolescence⁵. In fact, to “musealise” artefacts it is a general human reaction, as a tool against oblivion and alienation⁶.

So, museums are changing in many ways, getting more and more roles to play. They become educators, entertainers, places for leisure, but, also, community centres, not only with cultural targets, but, also, with social goals. For this reason, the choice made by the Chinese ICOM Committee, to put the 2011 General Conference under the theme “Museums for Social Harmony” comes not as a surprise. Of course, the

4. We may cite, for instance, the work done by the Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities, organised, in 2000, by the Canadian Museum Association. The group has appeared, also, as a consequence of the Summit of the Museums of the Americas, held in San Jose, in April, 1998, with the same theme.

2... Elaine Heumann Gurian, *A Blurring of Boundaries*, in *Curator*, 38, no. 1, 1995, p. 31.

3. A bright analyse, but mainly for the United States of America, in Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museum in motion: an introduction to the history and functions of museums*, Second edition, Plymouth, Altamira Press, 2008, pp. 281 – 303.

4.. Probably, one of the best explanations of the phenomenon, or, at least, a very well known, in Daniel Halévy, *Essai sur l'accélération de l'histoire*, Paris, Éditions Self, 1948.

5.. For a general discussion, Michael Brian Schiffer, *Behavioral Archaeology*, University of Utah Press, 2002.

6.. A very good description, in Hermann Lübke, *Der Fortschritt und das Museum: über den Grund unseres Vergnügens an historischen Gegenständen*, London, Institute of Germanic Studies, University of London, 1982.

theme is, somehow, connected with the old Confucian tradition, that defends two key values: political meritocracy and harmony. As museums are not political partisans, the value of harmony seems to be the best to serve the Chinese contemporary museums, as a fundamental cultural value. However, we could observe that this typical Chinese and Asian cultural value is embraced, today, in many other cultural environments, most of them in developing countries. But the recent economic crises, that affected most of the developed countries, also, brought the cultural institutions to the situation to embrace a closer position, towards the needed social harmony, in a disoriented and weakened society.

Romania made no exception. As the country stepped out from the former Communist regime, after a bitter social experiment, in the second half of the last century, Romania's museums looked for a new way of development. They were affected by two different attitudes. One of them was the natural need to bring the institutions closer to the museums in the rest of Europe – a world from which Romania was brutally taken, by the Soviet occupation and the Communist power. This effort meant to re-connect the scientific and curatorial networks, to re-think and refurbish the exhibitions and to change a whole way of designing museums. The second attitude – which has developed only in the last decade – was to promote museums as community institutions, deeply rooted in the problems and rhythms of the localities they were built in. The idea that the museum should be rooted in the local community is rather new for Romanians, as museums were almost always, before, established by central authorities and financed through central budget. As a consequence, being little connected with the local authorities, there was also little interest for local problems. Of course, many exceptions may contradict this statement, as there have always been persons emerging from the same localities, interested in serving them at their best. However, only the massive decentralisation of museums, started in the beginning of 1997 made possible a greater interest of curators in local communities' problems. Though, initially, most of the museums were very well received by the local authorities, soon, some of the mayors and other local politicians started to be interested to use the museums (as well as other cultural institutions) in order to serve their own political interests. Interfering with cultural programmes, trying to impose managers on political criteria, some local politicians succeeded to begin a conflict relation with museums. In this odd situation, the only defend of the museum specialists remained the general public and the local media. Many times, during the last 15 years, when the local museums found themselves in difficult situations, they tried to obtain



the public support. But not all of them have made it. Only those which have “invested” in the local public were enjoying such a help.

The lesson was quite well understood by many museums, in the last decade. Already, when the Romanian economy started to grow, in 2000, after 8 years of continuing decay and only one year of stagnation, museums have begun to apply new policies of approaching the public. If, before than, most of the effort and resources were concentrated in the research field, when the economic growth made it possible, museum managers have already learned their lesson and they turned their institutions towards the public. The phenomenon was largely debated by the Romanian specialists, in conferences and in the Romanian Journal of Museums¹.

There is no doubt that this tendency had a huge benefit for both museums and communities. On one side, for the first time, local communities have started to feel that these institutions really belong to them, increasing the ties with local history and cultures and transforming museums in the main bearers of the local identity². Museums have largely managed to do this, by enforcing special departments on educational matters, marketing and public relations. Starting with 2004, for five years, the Romanian Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs have organised a yearly workshop, in cooperation with The Fund for Arts and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe (an American foundation), discussing³, in a regional environment, for post-communist countries, the ways in which museums should build bridges with local communities. The benefit taken by museums was to be seen only in the last two years, when the economic crisis determined many local authorities to take measures against public spending in the cultural sector, which affected museums, also. The solidarity proved by the public was, indeed to be felt, through media and directly.

1.. For a detailed analysis of the situation up to 2003, see Virgil Ștefan Nițulescu, *Social Changes and their Impact on the Romanian Museums (1990 – 2003)*, in *Diana*, number 9, 2003/2004, pp. 32 – 38.

2.. For a very short but good argument regarding this trend and the need for specialised educational departments in museums, Monica Ioana Dumitru, *Redefining and reassuming the cultural identity of the community – a major objective of Romanian museum*, in *Revista muzeelor*, no.2, 2009, pp. 88 – 89. Also, for good examples in other countries, largely debated in Romania, Renée Kistemaker, *City museums as centres of civic dialogue*, in *Revista muzeelor*, no.3, 2006, pp. 22 – 35 and Peter Strasser, *Folk museums and their community. How to mobilise local resources – an example from the Austrian Alps*, in *Revista muzeelor*, no.2, 2009, pp. 9 – 21.

3.. Amongst the many lecturers: Ralph Appelbaum, Wim van der Weiden, Boris Micka and Mark Pacher.

Most of the museums have understood that the only real ally they have is their loyal public – a fact mirrored in the fact that the number of visitors, in the last two years, in spite of the crises and of the big loss on tourism, remained almost on the same level¹. Of course, one more time, this is not a general rule, but a visible trend, encouraged by the fact that, for the first time, since 1989, the number of young curators and researchers in the Romanian museums increased. The new generation of specialists have been largely influenced by the efforts made by international organisations (like ICOM, NEMO, European Museum Academy, European Museum Forum a.s.o.), that have advocated strongly, in the last two decades, for a larger integration of the museums in the communities' life.

The International Museums Day, in 2010, having the same theme as the ICOM general conference was, also, a good opportunity to exercise this new tendency in Romanian museums.

But the real change is still to come. A real change would mean that most of the museums would start to be really concerned with the communities' problems, in a pro-active way, involving themselves in the hot debates concerning unemployment, social inclusion, tolerance, environmental changes and sustainable development, in a direct and touching manner. Now, that the public is there, feeling museums closer than ever before, the field is ready for museums to embrace the most delicate social problems, proving that they are true actors in people's life, and that they could bring an important contribution in reaching the long desired goal of social harmony.

1.. 10,687,056 visitors in 2008 and 10,169,087 visitors in 2009.

