

## PRESUMPTION TO RESPONSIBILITY.

### Museums and contested history. Saying the unspeakable in museums

#### Conference

Organisators: ICOM Czechia, ICOM Austria, ICOM Slovakia

Place: Czech Republic, Moravian Gallery in Brno

Date: 22.-25. 11. 2017

#### THESES

Objects that are preserved and presented in museums are meant to document our cultural and political heritage. These Objects are selected by museum curators and suggest that they are an account of our ability to objectively document our history. But history is often perceived differently as it is a vital tool for defining a given people's identity, and each of us defines ourselves through important and fundamental historic events. How museums display and depict contested histories and traumatic memories shows if and how we are able to interpret events the particular society does not necessarily take pride in or would even prefer to erase from its history. Museums therefor can provide an opportunity to show different perspectives and to encourage visitors to think beyond their own individual experiences. Among the most popular exhibitions in museums are those that chart accounts of historical events visitors could either experience themselves or through members of their family, like parents or grandparents, and therefore are in the position to establish a personal and emotional connection. So how can museums exhibit individually experienced histories ?

The issue seems to be even more than burning since it is just the 20th century that is our experienced past, those times that have been one of the most complicated and tragic periods in human history so far, when events would take interpretative turns under the baton of totalitarian regimes for decades. In addition to artefacts from World War I and World War II also the ones relating to migration and (forced)exile or the history of political regimes in Eastern Europe in the second half of the century are becoming objects of musealisation.

The forthcoming conference is expected to focus on interpretative attitudes of today's museum professionals to those periods of history that are broadly perceived negatively or "rather negatively" or controversially by the public for whatever reason.

Museum objects themselves are extremely merciless. They are what they are; not a thousand words help us change their heart of matter. Unless we destroy them, they will present a solid base we can build our society on and raise its quality. A financial crisis can change our lives over night, a political situation can change faster than we are able to admit. Cultural heritage, however, remains unchanged; we may rely on its stability in any crisis we might be faced with.

## PROGRAMME

### Day 1

#### Opening speeches

#### Keynote speeches

##### **Instrumentalization of Museum in Interest of Politics**

*National museums, Museums documenting labour movements – and how they define a nation's identity*

The idea of a national museum is connected to the development of European societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as ethnical and/or political homogeneous entities (in dependence on either Central-European or Anglo-Saxon tradition). Since National Museums used to present their collections as “showcases” of the glorious past focusing on a nation's achievements and progress, this paradigm changed after WW II. The experience of the holocaust has given a rise to collecting and presenting the items documenting wars, genocides, and suffering – of both individuals and whole communities in museum exhibitions. But also an opportunity to communicate different historical perspectives, like the history of resistance-movements that fought against the Nazi-Regime.

On the other hand, political changes after the WW II initiated a new kind of museums in East-Central Europe that were driven ideologically by the ruling regimes. Institutions documenting labour movements or appropriating war victory to communist regimes fulfilled basically the given propaganda orders. And thus, how appropriate is the original concept of a National Museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Does it respond to the character of changing European societies in its initial base inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century? How, and by the presentation of what kind of artefacts are museums dedicated to the mission of explaining the manipulations of history by totalitarian regimes?

### Day 2

#### **Museums as Venues of Memory and Reconciliation**

The role of museums is changing: museums are perceived not only as custodians of material culture, as archivers or interpreters of historic processes, but more and more as dynamic and provocative agents in cultural processes. Modern museums should be interfaces between the re-presentation of history and contemporary questions concerned with a fast-changing world and its developments and crises – from migration to sustainable development. Museums, of course, are venues of memory – but how do we decide which narratives are being told? How do we implement different views – from individual experiences to scientific discourses – into our exhibitions? How can museums contribute to define, enrich and challenge our understandings of our history and of ourselves? How can museums promote reconciliation, tolerance and humanism? And: How can museums communicate those values to our visitors?

#### **Remembering our Humanity**

*Memorials of genocides, terror, military monuments and national memorials*

After bitter experiences and the devastating impact of the Second World War and the Shoah of six million Jews murdered by the Nazi regime, the flight and expulsion of millions of Germans from the eastern territories of the former Nazi-Germany after 1945 and the consequences in the era of the so-called “Cold War”, where western democracies and eastern

communist regimes had quite different perceptions of history, sites of conscience and memorials play an important role in fostering dialogue on peace and reconciliation in many European countries. How can historic and contemporary memorials commemorate stories of incarceration, violence, and suffering? How can a memorial symbolize different events, narratives, and social groups? And - What are contemporary strategies in communicating "memory"?

### **Destiny of Famous People Museums**

*Historical houses museums – to celebrate, to reflex or to forget?*

The sinusoid of political history in the museum environment has been mostly reflected in the branch of building and running memorial halls and museums of prominent personalities. Birth houses such as Adolf Hitler's in Branau, Klement Gottwald's in Dědice, Josef Hoffmann's in Brtnice or Jan Palach's in Všetaty have undergone periods of great fame as well ones denying their existence. However, is it possible not to remember? What should be the manner how to introduce such places to public like? What should be the way how to build museums of new heroes?

### **Day 3**

#### **Is it Not to Succumb to Sentiment?**

The presentation of the life culture of the countries in the former socialistic block has become a phenomenon of the recent years. Exhibitions of this sort are among to the most visited projects. However, they might pose the hidden danger of misinterpretation, as influenced by sentiment they frequently present the socialistic era to be a dream. One underlying problem is the term "retro" used in connection with the projects presenting this period.

#### **Social Topics and Anthropology**

*Displaying controversial themes: death, weapons, destruction, abuse, contemporary slavery, migration*

In collections of museums and their exhibitions, the tragic history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remains a period closely connected to violence, repression towards whole groups of a society, forced migration and – torture & death. Collecting of items documenting such disastrous events cannot avoid collecting – and exposing – visually abusive, controversial materials, often unacceptable even for skilled museum visitors. But, how far the display of photos or films of murdering, weapons instructions, torture tools or a direct presentation of mortal remains is yet adequate? Is there an acceptable methodology how to differentiate between an archaeological excavation found from the early Middle Ages and that of a grave of an anonymous soldier from the WW I? Or should collecting and presenting of human remains be a subject of some standardization in general museum practice? How to present and explain these often very brutal materials to sensitive visitors, e.g. children or religious groups?

#### **Musealization of Museum**

*Museum as a Documentation and Scientific Centre*

Is there any limit of acceptability in museums? Shall we enjoy the beauty of objects that exalts us? Seeing them as stories of creators? And what about the stories of objects? Where and how did they come to museums? Even behind rarest and most amazing collections were stories of those who owned them. Often, stories of injustice, despotism of the powerful,

ignorance and officials efforts to "normalize". Provenance research as a integral part of museums management had been for a long period of time neglected. Especially in recent decades, the situation has changed. Stories of objects mingle with human stories. Stories then become the subject of research and subsequent documentation of the museum's collection. Rarely lead to even to mitigate certain property-related injustices.

## DATES

May 26, 2017: Submission deadline

June 2017: Acceptance notification

November, 22–25, 2017: Conference

## SUBMITTING OF PROPOSALS

### We are inviting the following submissions

- Research papers (20 minutes talks on recent research or theoretical issues)
- Short talks (5 minutes talks, explanation of certain problem)
- Every lecture or talk will be followed by discussion (10 minutes)
- Day 3 will be closed by panel discussion

Submitting of proposal – online at: <http://network.icom.museum/icom-czech/conferences/presumption-to-responsibility/L/10/>

All papers will be reviewed by our expert panel ICOM Czechia, ICOM Slovakia, ICOM Austria and host partners.

Papers will be selected according to the following criteria

- Papers which address the conference themes
- Papers which are deliverable in the format and time allotted

The selection panel reserves the right to suggest alternate formats for proposals. The selection panel's decision is final.

Enquiries: [icom@mzm.cz](mailto:icom@mzm.cz)

## THE CONFERENCE WILL BE:

- **International.** The participants are welcomed from all over the world to share ideas as well as problems with realisations.
- **Open-minded.** New approaches and ideas are welcome.
- **Honest.** We value presentations that are open about failures as well as successes. A critical but correct discussion will be welcomed.
- **In time.** Timing is very important; please take care about the time of your lecture or talk in a discussion. The chair-person is authorized to stop all too long presentations expanding a limit.
- **Translated.** Interpreting will be provided among Czech/Slovak, English and German language. Please speak slowly and let the translators be able to translate your talk properly.

We will await your .ppt presentation 10 days before the conference. Pictures should be followed by notes, to improve the basic understanding. You allow the organiser to archive and publish online your presentation.

## VENUE

Brno is the second largest city in the Czech Republic. It was called the suburb of Vienna in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many buildings in Brno were designed by architects of the Viennese Ringstrasse. Until 1945, it was the city of two nations: Germans and Czechs. The world-famous people had been born or lived there, such as Johann Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), a founder of genetics (1866); Ernest Mach (1838-1916), a “grandfather” of the Einstein’s Theory of Relativity; Adolf Loos (1870-1936), an architect and theorist of modern architecture; a writer Robert Musil (1880-1942); Jan Jelínek (1926-2004), the President of ICOM in 1971-1977; or a museologist, Z. Z. Stránský (1926-2016).

The city boasts the oldest museum building in the Czech Republic, which is operated by the Moravian Gallery in Brno. The famous Villa Tugendhat designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1928-1930 has been on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list since 2001. The internationally famous fair trade area has been existing in Brno since 1928. During the Communist era, Brno was a show-case of socialism in Czechoslovakia.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Brno was among the first cities in the Czech Republic that accepted its German history as part of its own being. Brno called the year 2015 the Year of Reconciliation, and expressed its regret about Brno’s Germans displacement in 1945.

The geographical position of the city – its proximity to Capitals of Austria (Vienna) and Slovakia (Bratislava) – makes it easily reachable and thus suitable for international seminars and conferences involving colleagues from many other foreign countries.