

## Ethnographic Collections: (Re)Imagining, (Re)Interpreting and (Re)Valuing for Diverse Audiences

### Introduction

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*Dr. Annette B. Fromm (Chair of ICME 2007-2013; Independent Scholar), Dr. Viv Golding (Chair of ICME 2013-16; Senior Lecturer, University of Leicester, School of Museum Studies)*

We write in our capacity as Chairs (Fromm 2007-2013, Golding 2013-2016) of the International Committee for Museums of Ethnography (ICME) to introduce a selection of three papers from the 2013 International Council of Museums (ICOM) Triennial General Conference and ICME Annual Meeting in Rio de Janeiro. First, let us outline some relevant points about ICOM.

ICOM, created in 1946, is a 'global network of National ICOM Committees in 117 countries representing 20000 museums around the world' that is 'committed to the conservation of the world's natural and cultural heritage' (<http://uk.icom.museum/about-us/icom-international/>). ICOM has a consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) and is concerned with ethical matters pertaining to museums, notably raising 'awareness of illicit trade in cultural artefacts, promoting the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and facilitating the restitution of cultural property' (Ibid.).

Currently ICOM counts 32000 museum professionals as members and has 31 specialist International Committees (IC). Members initially join ICOM through their National Committees and then select membership in one International Committee according to their main area of interest and expertise. This selection can be difficult for those of us with wide-ranging passions and experience, but it is possible – even recommended – to be active in more International Committees than the one you are a formal member of. And fortunately the warm personal relations established between the board members of the special interest groups permits collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. An elected Chair and Board manages each IC. The International Committees meet annually in different locations around the world to discuss themes relevant to their discipline and every three years as part of the ICOM Triennial General Conference. Hosting the ICOM triennial is a competitive process that depends on the votes cast by National and specialist International Committees several years prior to the event. In 2016, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ICOM, the Triennial Conference will be held in Milan, Italy, the successful city at the 2012 vote at the annual meeting in Paris, and in 2019 it will be hosted by Kyoto, Japan. The host for the triennial is always a city, not a nation, though the national government usually is central in giving support. And it is selected 4 years ahead, in Paris, the year before a triennial conference.

The 2013 ICOM Triennial Conference theme of Memory + Creativity = Social Change, inspired the work of a number of International Committees. Most committees used this overall theme to address topics more relevant to their particular work; ICME chose *Curators, Collections, Collaboration: Towards a Global Ethics* as its theme.<sup>1</sup> Speakers were invited to bring their experiences and points of view on this topic especially considering who creates memories and whose stories are represented in our museums (Program ICME 2013). In addition, ICME spearheaded a collaboration with three other committees to organize a day-long session of papers exploring the topic, *Focus on Collecting: Contemporary Collecting and the Reinterpretation of (Older) Collections*. The other committees involved were the International Council of Museums Committee of Collecting (COMCOL), the International Council of Museums of Art History (ICMAH), the International Council of Regional Museums (ICR), and one National Committee - ICOM Korea - with whom ICME has a longstanding relationship since the 2004 ICOM General Conference in Seoul.

The rich programme focused on reimagining or reinterpreting collections in collaboration with originating or source communities to engage diverse new audiences. The papers presented approaches taken by different yet similar disciplines as well as a group of case studies from the National Museum of Contemporary History in Seoul. A major concern addressed was how to enhance the social value of museums by making creative explorations into shared ways of working with material culture and the intangible heritage from which it emerges.

The presenters in Rio asked how museum collections, often established in colonial times with the 'difficult histories' of heritage, might be reemployed to progress a more positive future. Presenters discussed collaborative relationships with artists, source communities, and local communities that were seen to enhance understandings of 'us' and 'them' in the frontier zone of 'both-and' that lies beyond restrictive 'either-or' binary oppositions.

The following three papers were presented as part of the day-long discussions of changing interpretations of collections.

Hélène Bernier and Mathieu Viau-Courville from the Musées de la civilisation (MCQ) in Quebec in their paper, 'The Action: 'Rebel bodies' at the Musées de la civilisation, Québec,' consider how performance genres, such as dance, involve human movements and bodily actions that embody social memory. Bernier and Viau-Courville argue that such work can encourage sustainable civic participation and further highlight the museum as a dynamic loci for the promotion of positive social change.

The second paper by Karen Exell, Coordinator of the MA Museum and Gallery Practice at UCL-Qatar, 'Contemporary collecting in Qatar: reimagining identity in a new nation state', considers the impact of the state, independent since 1971, on the construction of a new Qatari identity for global consumption and national cohesion. She examines the highly politicized power of the museum to validate certain narratives, and the Echo Memory collection of found objects from the Heart-of-Doha urban development project, which represents the lives of the South Asian communities that lived in the area.

The final paper taken from the day-long session on 'Contemporary Collecting and the Reinterpretation of (Older) Collections' was presented by Mille Gabriel and Christian Sune Pedersen from the National Museum of Denmark. Gabriel and Pedersen's paper explores the Ethnographic Collections at the National Museum of Denmark and the changing global relations since colonial times. They outline new ways of activating the historic collections, notably including contemporary collecting, co-curation and dialogue with the originating communities. Specifically they reference the special exhibitions with the citizens of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Montana, a community of Navajo weavers from Arizona, and resident Mexicans celebrating the *Día de los Muertos* in Denmark.

Through these three cases, the authors circle around questions such as: how do we prioritize, when collecting the contemporary? What types of material or immaterial culture should we aim for? Who chooses? How do we ensure that community involvement not only challenges the authority of museums, but also informs museological practices in new and constructive ways? How can museums work productively within national and international contexts? These are some of the questions reflexive practitioners in ICME address and we would welcome you joining this conversation.

## Biographies

**Hélène Bernier** is currently head of exhibitions and international affairs at the Musées de la civilisation (MCQ). Following a career in communication and exhibition design in the private sector, she joined the MCQ in 1990, first as project manager, then as head of international exhibitions, and later as head of thematic exhibitions. She also served as director of the Department of Visual Arts, Media Arts, and Literature, and director of Program and Planning at the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (2002-2011). Throughout her career, she produced over 40 exhibitions presented in Quebec and abroad. She was also an Executive member of the Council of the International Committee for Exhibition Exchange (ICEE) between 1998 and 2001.

## Exhibitions and International Affairs

Musées de la civilisation  
 16 rue de la Barricade  
 PO BOX 155, Station B  
 Quebec (Quebec)  
 Canada G1K 7A6  
[helene.bernier@mcq.org](mailto:helene.bernier@mcq.org)

**Mathieu Viau-Courville** holds a PhD in Art History from the School of World Art Studies and Museology, University of East Anglia, UK. He joined the Musées de la civilisation's research division as researcher and scientific coordinator in 2011, having previously worked as affiliate curator at the National Museum of Archaeology in La Paz, Bolivia, and as research affiliate at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He is editor of the journal *THEMA*. La revue des Musées de la civilisation and is currently preparing, as guest editor, the special issue 'Museums without curators' in *Pasajes*. Revista de pensamiento contemporáneo (Spain).

## Research Division

Musées de la civilisation  
 16 rue de la Barricade  
 PO BOX 155, Station B  
 Quebec (Quebec)  
 Canada G1K 7A6  
[mviaucourville@mcq.org](mailto:mviaucourville@mcq.org)

**Karen Exell** is Honorary Senior Research Associate at UCL Qatar, and a consultant at Qatar Museums. She directed the MA in Museum and Gallery Practice at UCL Qatar from 2011-2015, after teaching museums studies and holding curatorial positions in university museums in the UK for several years. She is currently involved in two Qatar National Research Fund NPRP projects, as a PI on a project researching museum pedagogy in Qatar and the region, and as LPI on a project exploring the concept of national identity in relation to the planned new National Museum of Qatar. Her recent publications include the co-edited volumes, *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (Ashgate, 2014) and *Museums in Arabia: Transnational Practices and Regional Processes* (Routledge, 2016). Her monograph, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (Routledge) was published in April 2016.

**Mille Gabriel** holds a Ph.D. degree in Anthropology (2011) and an M.A. in Prehistoric Archaeology (2002) from the University of Copenhagen. Since 2006, she has worked at the National Museum of Denmark, where she is now curator of the American collections at the Ethnographic Collections. Her research interests include repatriation, indigenous rights, museums and the impact of heritage on cultural identity. She is the secretary of ICOM Denmark and in 2011 was appointed member of the special committee of the Danish National Commission of UNESCO.

**Dr. Annette B. Fromm**, a folklorist and museum specialist, has over thirty years of experience in museums and community projects in Ohio, Oklahoma, and Florida. Her work has ranged from small and large institutions which emphasis from ethnic cultural diversity to historic preservation. Fromm is the immediate past President of the International Committee of Museums of Ethnography, an international committee of the International Council of Museums. She also served as Coordinator of Museum Studies at Florida International University from 2007-2015.

Dr. Fromm has published articles on immigrant-ethnic groups in America, Jews in Greece, Greek folklore, Native Americans in museums, multicultural museums, and folk art. She has led many workshops nationally and internationally on museum issues, folklore and folklife, and American ethnicity. Fromm taught anthropology and museum studies at the University of Tulsa for over seven years and served as Visiting Associate Professor in Judaic Studies at Florida Atlantic University.

**Dr. Viv Golding** joined the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies in 2002 following a varied career in London as Head of Formal Education at the Horniman Museum (1992-2002) and Head of Ceramic Arts at Community Education Lewisham (1980-1992). She has been a member of ICOM-ICME since 2003 and was elected President (2013-16) in Rio de Janeiro after serving on the Board as Newsletter Editor (2004-7) and Secretary (2010-13).

Dr. Golding is widely funded to speak on her research themes internationally including: JSPS Museum and University Collaboration (2012-13); AHRC Translating Cultures (2011-13); AHRC Care for the Future (2011-12). She also publishes widely in the field. Her most recent publications include Golding, V. and W. Modest, (eds) (2013a), *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections, Collaboration*, Berg; Golding, V 2013b *Museums, Poetics and Affect*, Feminist Press; Golding, V. 2009 *Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity Race and Power*, Ashgate. Further details can be found at <http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/contactus/vivgolding.html>

#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> A number of the papers from the 2013 ICME conference and other conferences were published separately in the volume, *Museums and Truth*, published by Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014