

Guest Editorial

Museums and National Identity

*Fiona McLean**

This collection of papers has been brought together to address what has become a highly charged issue for many museums, and of course in particular, for national museums – the representation of national identity. The widening debates on identity have opened up new challenges for the museum profession around such an issue. At the macro level, the transformation of identity has taken place within the backdrop of decolonisation, imperial atrophy, globalization and the decline of the nation-state. At the national level, the challenge becomes one of reconciliation and of promoting national integration within the plurality and diversity of identity. Through the authority vested in them, museums authenticate and present identities through the presentation of heritage. National museums are implicit in the construction of national identities, and the ways in which they voice or silence difference can reflect and influence contemporary perceptions of identities within the national frame.

National museums have travelled far from the nationalistic and self-improving goals of the early national museums of the 19th century. Their response to identity has now entered the public domain, and as the papers in this collection indicate, they are very much implicit in the social and political agendas of the 21st century. In particular, narrating the nation in the museum increasingly becomes a task of narrating the diversity of the nation and for engaging in a politics of recognition. In an era of multiculturalism, women's movements, movements for recognition of homosexual men and lesbian women, respect for the environment as well as nationalist movements, coupled with large scale movements of populations across the globe for travel, commerce or migration, the identity of the nation becomes increasingly fluid and contingent.

As this collection of essays indicates, museums have taken on these challenges in different ways. Some have generated confrontation in their approach, while others have encouraged an increased acceptance of diversity. In each case, the museum has had to address the questions of whose history is being constructed and whose memories are being negotiated by the museum, and ultimately whose voices will be heard and whose will be silenced. By looking at the processes of construction and negotiation and their outcomes, and by recognising the connections, the museum profession will be better able to reconcile these differences.

The very recent increase in writing about national identity in museums is a reflection of the recognition of these contemporary shifts, but also has been a response to the burgeoning of new national museums and substantial refurbishments of existing museums. This special issue seeks to add to discussions in a small but growing field of research on museums around these issues. Collections making specific reference to museums and national identity include Boswell and Evans, 1999; Fladmark, 2000; Kaplan 1994 and McIntyre and Wehner 2001. Other recently published work investigating national identity has focused mainly on individual nations and museums, and include Cooke and McLean 2002a, 2002b; Crooke 2000, 2001; Holo 1999; Macdonald 2003; McLean and Cooke 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Mason 2004. There are also a number of works which investigate issues relevant to the national identity debate in museums, such as Bennett 1995; Dicks 2000; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp, Kraemer and Lavine 1992; Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Simpson 2001.

This issue aims to suggest some new parameters for investigation. In the first paper, Susan Ashley considers how museums in Canada have been slow in embracing the dynamics of social change, moving from hegemonic agents of dominant culture to public forums disengaged from state power. She argues that inclusive participation in museum representations is only a recent concern in Canadian museums and uses an example of the

exhibit 'The Underground Railroad' at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in order to discuss this. Through dialogue with community groups the museum negotiated a view of Canadian identity which allowed for multiple voices instead of the over-arching authoritative voice of the museum. By eliding the difference between the museum acting as the voice of the state articulating identity and nationalism with the museum as a public space for opinion and meaning-making, the museum can become a site for public identity discourse and social inclusion. Ashley sets the challenge for the rest of the papers in the collection by demanding that, 'the museum must be more open to ways that will temper the authoritative agency and certainty; remove homogeneity and single points of view, reject exclusion, encourage complexity and pluralism, and ensure conversation, dialogue and true cohesion'. It is inevitable that there will be further debates about the museum's role in the social process of citizenship. It is essential that these debates do not become emotive and merely political footballs, but are informed by research such as that conducted by Ashley.

Rhiannon Mason further opens up the debate when she discusses the factors which resulted in the renaming of the Welsh Folk Museum as the Museum of Welsh Life. Mason's argument is that the macro factors, such as the museum's historical legacy, political and social influences, which explain the museum's representation, should be considered along with the micro factors such as marketing and visitor studies within the museum context. Mason's thoughtful paper teases out these influences and indicates that there is no one higher reading of the museum, but multiple representations which offer 'a meeting point for competing ideas about national identities'. It is the historic and contemporary which meet in the museum with the vision of what it is to be Welsh being constantly remade in response to changing demands of the present. Despite this, though, the authorial voice of those being represented, as outlined by Ashley, is largely absent in the re-visioning processes of the museum.

The re-visioning of two national museums, one an established museum and the other a new museum, is the subject of the paper by David Dean and Steven Rider. Both the newly established National Museum of Australia and the existing Canadian Museum of Civilization were the subjects of review after much public controversy over their interpretations of the national past. Dean and Rider meticulously explore the genesis of each review process and their findings offer much food for thought for other national museums. The review process of the National Museum of Australia was undertaken by a panel of four academics who were tasked with investigating whether the Museum had fulfilled its obligations and making recommendations on future priorities. The review of the Canadian Museum of Civilization focused on the Canada Hall, with four historians being charged with the specific task of defining Canadian political history and suggesting how it could be incorporated in to the galleries. Dean and Rider then focus on a number of themes which were central to both reviews and compare them in both contexts. Their key conclusion is that both Canada and Australia are nations which are subjects of ongoing history wars given the diversity of their populations, and that museums have to mediate on the conflicting perspectives in the absence of any generally-accepted national historical narratives. In the case of Canada, the museum was already injecting a political dimension in to the Canada Hall's narrative by the time the panel reported. The review process of the Australian national museum, which was prompted by a conservative backlash to the museum's representations of the diversity of identity in Australia, despite some criticisms in the approach endorsed the overall attempt to confront diversity and to represent contentious issues.

Finally, Myrian dos Santos takes us back to where we started with Ashley's paper by investigating the representation of black people in Brazilian museums. By exploring the ways in which the museum narratives represent the race issue, she concludes that they do so by either silencing or exaggerating the identities of black people in the nation. This paper draws a contrast with Ashley's readings of the Underground Railroad, an exhibit which sought to affirm Black history as an integral part of Canadian national identity. Santos concludes in accord with Ashley that the voices of different populations in a nation need to be heard in the creation of museums and exhibitions, and she cites institutions created by African-Brazilians which are recounting new narratives about the nation which allow for different claims of construction of blackness.

This collection of papers is particularly appropriate for a journal dedicated to 'museum and society'. It teases out a number of issues and generated further questions which need to be addressed if museums are to steer a path through the tensions of nationhood. If museums are to respond appropriately and to engender difference rather than to subsume difference, then it is essential that we continue to investigate the ways in which national identity is constructed and negotiated in museums. Perhaps the challenge is to become more holistic in our approach. This collection dwells on the production processes of representation with little reference to the museum audience. Much has been written on the professional or academic response, but less on the audience response. Many museums have already taken up the challenge of audience involvement in representation of self. It is time for research to follow suit, and consider the processes and outcomes of national identity negotiation and construction from both the production and consumption perspectives.

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