

HERITAGE AND MUSEUM ARTEFACTS AS CULTURAL
RESOURCE FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE
IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

*Patrimonio y artefactos de los museos como recursos para la práctica creativa
en la transformación social*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the problem of using the artifacts of a culture of peace in museum and educational practice as a creative resource for cross-cultural communication and social reconciliation. The author challenges the view at the exhibits of a Peace Museum only as stiffened trace of time, memory index and memorial objects. It is proposed to consider museum artifacts as actual participants of current events from two angles of vision. Historical artifacts as museum exhibits and bygone experiences (samples of the past) acquire their meaning and significance only in contact with the present, joining the dialogue on the latest challenges humankind faces here and now. At the same time, objects as samples of peacemaking convey experiences of a culture of non-violence and reconciliation, and therefore become the most in demand in urgent and dramatic situations of the present day. Unlike standard interpretations, I argue that the objects exhibited at a peace museum can be useful to the society only when we manage to relate and update them to the current life experience. Keeping and exposing the artifacts of peacemaking only as exhibits of the past, we mothball them, depriving them of vital communion with modernity. This paper is based on published materials, projects and collections of the Samarkand Museum of Peace and Solidarity (Uzbekistan) and creative practices of the Samara Society for Cultural Studies “Artifact - Cultural Diversity” (Russia).

Key words: museum culture, artifacts of peace, creative communication, visualization of memory, experience of reconciliation.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo se centra en el problema del uso de los artefactos de una cultura de paz en el Museo y la práctica educativa como un recurso creativo para la comunicación intercultural y reconciliación social. El autor desafía la visión en las exhibiciones de un Museo de la paz sólo como refuerzo del rastro de tiempo, índice de la memoria

y monumento de recuerdos. Se propone considerar los objetos del Museo como participantes reales de los acontecimientos actuales desde dos puntos de vista. Artefactos históricos como objetos expuestos del Museo y de experiencias pasadas (muestras del pasado) que adquieren su significado y significación sólo en contacto con el presente, junto al diálogo en los últimos retos de la humanidad aquí y ahora. Al mismo tiempo, objetos como muestras de paz que transmiten experiencias de una cultura de no violencia y reconciliación y por lo tanto, se convierten en la mayoría de la demanda en situaciones urgentes y dramáticas de la actualidad. A diferencia de interpretaciones estándar, sostengo que los objetos exhibidos en un Museo de la paz pueden ser útiles a la sociedad sólo cuando logremos relacionarlos y actualizarlos a la actual experiencia de vida. Mantener y exponer los artefactos de la paz solamente como muestra del pasado, sólo suponen encapsularlos como naftalina negándoles su comunión vital con la modernidad. Este documento se basa en materiales publicados, proyectos y colecciones del Museo de la paz y la solidaridad de Samarcanda (Uzbekistán) y las prácticas creativas de la sociedad de estudios culturales de Samara "Artefacto – Diversidad Cultural" (Rusia).

Palabras clave: cultura de Museo, artefactos de paz, comunicación creativa, visualización de la memoria, la experiencia de reconciliación

1. PROBLEM FOR A MUSEUM: HOW CAN THE PAST BE MODERN?

Probably, each of us has acquaintances who do not really like to go to museums. And so, it might be difficult to persuade a friend to visit a museum. On the question of what caused this reluctance, he says, "It is dull, lifeless, and detached there!" One must admit that it is a very common situation that obligatory visits to museum are often dreaded instead of being keenly anticipated. Why is this so? To answer this question, it is necessary to clarify the modern sense and meaning of the basis on which museums arise, i.e. history itself and its most responsive values - artifacts of peacemaking and nonviolence that are presented in the respective museums.

Let's try to figure it out. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between heritage, as 1) a memorative repository of stories and values from heritage, and 2) a vital substrate through upon which one can reflect on conditions in the modern world. In her recent study of cultural mission of the modern museum Claire Bishop (after W. Benjamin) distinguishes between two kinds of stories: the first as the keeper of the sacred memory heritage, which commemorates triumphs, and the second as a way of requalification and identification of issues of today, seeking out "in the past a source of the present historical moment", that is "the determining motivation of our interest to the past... Rather than think about the museum collections as repositories of treasures, we could rethink of them as public archives" (Bishop 2014, p. 72), that is as sort of resource-consulting centers

of culture, visualizing alternatives for development and encouraging us to active transformative social practice.

However, the first of these missions still dominates modern museum policy. This explains the separation of the sacredly protected world of museum treasures from the urgent imperatives of today.

The world changes, the heritage remains. And in this situation the contradiction between the history of the past and the reality of the present is exacerbated, i.e. between the sense of whom and to what the heritage is serving and of how it is involved in the transformation of modern culture. In other words, the question arises: how to make the heritage modern, attractive and creative for the present? For only in this case, can history truly serve a protective lesson and function for modern day culture. To protect requires connecting the past, the present and the future. After all, the past does not live in the past, it becomes such (the past) by and for the sake of the present. Thus, the past finds its constructive function through its widespread and responsible involvement in the actual practice of the present.

It seems that peace museums can become not only institutions of harmonization and removal of these contradictions, but also a catalyst for positive change. After all, nothing in heritage is so visibly and fundamentally in contact with modernity as peace and peacemaking. This is at least partially because peace as a model of ideal coordination of interests has no past as such, whereas the texture of the heritage is always a material of the past. In a sense, peacemaking experience is the part of the past that most completely expresses itself through the present. In essence, there is no peace in the past. Peace is always in the present.

Therefore, peace must be considered as the part of the heritage that, towering over the past (but without coming off it!), links it with the present and overwhelmingly influences the future. In our view, this is not only a problem, but is also a part of its solution. I argue that management of heritage in contemporary museum practice can be effectively implemented on the basis of the creative experience of museums of peace and nonviolence. Peacemaking values as memorative objects are most strongly directed to the present. Ideas and artifacts of peace give to the historical heritage of the past the necessary vital dynamics and by that reveal their constructive potential for modern transformations.

Giuseppe Lampedusa once noted that if you want everything to remain the same, it is necessary to change something all the time. And indeed, all innermost (sacred) itself is always motionless. But, at the same time, the sacred (motionless) grows by the most mobile and changeable. This is clearly visible by the example of religious practice. So, even religious objects (as the most conservative and motionless ones) despite their subject-sacral detachment (distancing) from life, display their involvement with it namely by having vivid ceremonial actions

(symbolic drama) that have been carried out around them and addressed to the welfare of those who and for the sake of whom they are provided. Any ideal by itself is motionless and without mobility of those whom it serves, it (this ideal) becomes lifeless and worthless. Peace museums exhibit samples of peacemaking as some ideal instructive expositions, but (unlike the church altars and icons) vivid symbolic (and creative) activities and artistic drama until now are underrepresented in them.

After all, any absolute needs something to revolve around it. Losing this rotation, it inevitably ceases to be an absolute. Values are not values by themselves, but rather they become such only when surrounded by those who yearn for them. Without this attraction, values lose their significance. It is indicative that we speak of the most valuable object (thing) as being “invaluable”. It enables us to assume that a museum comes to life and grows with its links with what lies outside of it, in the big and hectic modern life. Creative practice in the museum’s policy is the ability to coordinate and harmonize space and time, a human and an object, traditions and innovations, and, at times, to skillfully connect the unconnected.

2. PEACE MUSEUMS AS A PLATFORM OF COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING ARTIFACTS OF PEACEMAKING AND NONVIOLENCE

Based on these postulates, let us consider a peace museum as a place of collecting and exhibiting artifacts of peacemaking and nonviolence. What is a peace museum and what is its social mission in a changing global environment and in conditions of challenges to humanity? In order to look into this matter, it is necessary, first of all, to clarify and understand the significance of such important phenomenon of cultural life as a museum, i.e. to provide some clarifications regarding this concept.

The museum serves many functions in contemporary culture. For example, the museum is: 1) a place of collecting and preserving of historically significant artifacts; 2) an institution of a representation of social values; 3) a showcase of samples of artistic and aesthetic creativity; 4) a mechanism of retranslation and transmission of historical experience; 5) a transmitter of cultural communication; 6) an object of socio-cultural design and creative practice. At the same time, *artefacts of peacemaking* express an experience of the culture of nonviolence and reconciliation, and therefore they become the most in demand in urgent and dramatic situations (Ionesov 2008).

However, essentially, all these dimensions are due to interactions between social and material articulations of culture. In other words, it is a question of the relation of a human and an object (eds Biriukov & Ionesov 2012, 2014, Genisaretskiy 1993, Harman 2005, 2012, Heidegger 1993, Toporov 1993). People create things

and put in them not only their energy, but also their vision of the world, values, sensual and artistic emotions, social experience and living practice. In essence, the object expresses, fixes, and keeps the harmony of that part of the world of which it is made. After all, any hand-made article embodies the order specified by its creator. Every object has its own order. Depending on the structure of that order, the function of an object (a gun, a teapot, a book, telephone, sunglasses, sculpture, poster, pen, etc.) will be determined. Once manufactured, the object not only keeps the memory of its time and its social and artistic values, but also shows us for what it was made, what a person needed and valued, for what he aspired.

“Thingness is an approximation of the world” (M. Heidegger). But what is peace if not an approximation of reality. This feature of the anthropological nature of an object was recognized even in antiquity. “When a human being receives its completion, it indicates philanthropy (humanitarianism). When the things receive their completion, it indicates knowledge” (“Liji/ The Book of Rites”, IV-I centuries. BC.), i.e. when a person fully realizes himself and a thing is manufactured properly. An object that is becoming a thing is endowed with a gift of voice, speech that enables it to speak, i.e. to expose itself or declare itself, i.e. to be *seen* and *heard*. Only when an object starts to speak i.e. display the signs and herald (according to V. I. Dahl to have a presentiment, to judge, herald), it becomes a thing. The thing becomes such only when we use it, when we understand it, i.e. we know what it serves for. For this reason, in every object is *hidden* a human, in every human - an object. The object is preserving the life experience, but at the same time it is oriented to change the life for the better, to notice some deficiency and to correct it. As it was aptly observed by Maurice Maeterlinck, “To understand everyday life, something must be added to it...” (from the play “*There, inside*”). The object is valuable precisely because getting involved in the system of social practice, it encourages people to change something and improve it.

3. THE MUSEUM AS A COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

Undoubtedly, peace museums act as an important institution of preservation and visualization of historical memory. And when cultures experience an expansion of innovations and global challenges, peace museums can become a strategy for creative actions and humanistic transformations. But how does one make memorative objects and museum institutions an effective tool of modern cultural policy and humanistic practice?

Here it is important to consider a peace museum as a communicative space and as an experience of reconciliation in the dialogue of an object and a person. “Objects talk to each other using a system of signs and are guided by specific rules of syntax... A phenomenon of objects refers to the world, much less real than we

would expect from the universe determined by visible omnipotence of processes of consumption and extraction of benefit” (Baudrillard 2006, p.11).

Museum artifacts are positioned as the actual characters of current events in the two angles of vision. The historic artifacts like museum exhibits and the experience of going through these samples of the past acquire their meaning and significance only in contact with the present by engaging in a dialogue on the latest challenges of today's life.

We should note that “every object as thing is mainly a series of conditions fulfillment of which creates an opportunity” (Ortega y Gasset 1997, p. 207). So in a cycle of cultural and genetic transformation of a thing, we can distinguish several consecutive articulations or modes: 1) *concretization* (selection and separation of an object), material it is made of - from Latin *concretus* - thick, condensed, compacted); 2) *positioning of object* (matrix, physical environment and location of the object); 3) *design/ construction* (layout, morphological ordering - from Latin *construere* - create); 4) *project management/ projecting* (organization of relations with the outside world, inclusion in the society - from Latin *projectus* - thrown forward); 5) *projection* (visual screening and communication of a thing). The final destination of cultural and genetic transformation of things actually performs its visual-art projection or symbolic personification, where the thing becomes a character, acquires eventfulness and a plot (Ionesov 2012). Let's recall a remark by G. Deleuze – montage/ assemblage becomes “montrage” (the philosopher refers to the expression of French director Robert Lapoujade (“Du montage au montrage”, from French *montrer* “to show”) (Deleuze 2004, p. 337).

4. OBJECTS AS A CHARACTER OF PEACEMAKING AND CREATIVITY

There are several reasons to consider a peace museum as a cultural activity and creative practice. First, a peace museum acts as an institution of cultivation of experience and social practice by incorporating the artifacts of peacemaking in a dialogue with people. Second, unlike standard interpretations, we argue that the object expositions of a peace museum can be useful to the society only when they manage to creatively link this past and update it with current experience. Third, leaving and exposing the artifacts of peacemaking only as exhibits of the past, we, thus, conserve and even sacrifice them, depriving them of vital communion with modernity. We are speaking about a dangerous syndrome of the discharge of a memorative thing from life's daily practice. Already in the 1920s Walter Benjamin paid attention to this harmful situation for a man. “Things lose warmth,” he wrote. Everyday objects subtly but inexorably push themselves away from a man. As a result, day after day he has to perform an enormous task to overcome the open resistance emanating from them. He has to compensate their coldness with his warmth so as not to grow numb among them, and with infinite care to touch

their thorns so as not to bleed to death. ...And even the life of the nation has been marked by degradation of things which follows the decline of a person and becomes his punishment” (Benjamin 2012, p.34). The problem is that the design of the museum changes slowly, and therefore many new exhibits quickly lose their relevance and become outdated. Thus, the artifacts of peacemaking may form a lifeless environment and a communicative gap in the dialogue between visitors and the museum exhibit. In addition, things are capable to change the space themselves, if they are creatively curated in the context of communication (Vesch 2002).

Here is how this situation is characterized by the famous designer Karim Rashid: “The problem is that our visual and information world in recent years has changed a lot, and it is necessary to bring the physical world into conformity with it. For example, while flying on business, I wrote an e-mail and noticed that everything is awfully uncomfortable – it is inconvenient to sit; inconvenient on where to put your hands; inconvenient to write; the lighting is poor. Everything is badly designed, everything is badly elaborated. I looked around, nothing in this plane has changed in the last forty or fifty years. A toilet in the airplane tries to imitate a toilet in the house. But it’s not a house; it is a completely different thing. If one is to look around, one can always find something that it is necessary to re-design” (Vesch 2002).

In the opinion of Graham Harman, two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third where they exist side by side until something happens that allows them to interact. ...We distort things both by our vision, and by our use of them (Harman 2012). And this is particularly relevant for museum exhibits in which samples of a culture of peace and non-violence are displayed. After all, there is nothing that so strongly distorts its virtue as an inappropriate and arbitrary presentation. Any gap between the artifact of peacemaking, visual image, aesthetic form, context and presentation method leads to a wrong, distorted perception and creates the very “gap, through which enters cruelty and violence” (Pomerantz 2013, p.10).

A well-known experimenter, an apologist of organic minimalism, Ross Lovegrove created a design aesthetic that adapts to the human form, imitating and repeating its movements, and even anticipating his hopes and aspirations. When creating his collections, the designer found inspiration in the Oriental ceramic culture, thanks to which he could combine modern design with ethnic motifs. Exhibited at the museum halls of the world, his art exhibits are as emotional as they are ergonomic. Such creative action is of particular importance for a peace museum, because the culture of non-violence and of peacemaking is addressed to innermost human feelings, to the living contact of the past and present, national and universal, social and artistic, personal and planetary.

Thus, modern communicative practice appears in a creative society in the form of a new dramatic art and a culture of participation. Multimedia revolution puts forward not only efficient technologies of interaction between subjects and objects of culture, but also it constructs for them trans-subject narratives and scenarios for participation in events, offering various combinations of interactivity and motivating a search for new forms of creativity and transformation alternatives (Pachter & Landry 2003).

5. PEACE MUSEUMS AS A SPHERE OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND CITIZEN DIPLOMACY

Peace museums appear as a sphere of cultural participation and citizen diplomacy. Museum culture through artifacts of peacemaking provokes life and causes emotions, records experience, makes the world sensitive, concrete, contactable, and forces us to change. It is obvious that the way of transformation of culture lies through the promotion of creative practice based less on behavioral standards, but rather on the principle of action and creative participation (Joas 2005, Hawkins 2011). *Culture of participation* can be regarded as a paradigm of positive changes and a scenario of designing a new communication environment. Thus, it is important to focus not so much on knowledge as such, but rather on the creative use of knowledge, its social design and inclusion in culture. For in today's world, as it was noted by Steve Jobs "it's not enough to possess outstanding qualities, it is also necessary to be able to use them."

Therefore, museum artifacts as patterns of cultural peacemaking are not just what we store and display in a museum, but also what is included in the design of a creative environment and communicative space of cross-cultural dialogue, that is, they become a factor in social change. This is clearly demonstrated by the socio-cultural projects of the Samarkand Museum of Peace and Solidarity (Uzbekistan) and creative practices of Samara Society for Cultural Studies "Artifact - Cultural Diversity" (Russia) (Ionesov & Ionesov 2001, 2014, Ionesov 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013).

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