

Museums and Social Harmony: An Interpretation

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The term 'museums and social harmony' can have many meanings depending on the viewpoint of the interpreter. But as we approach ICOM's triennial General Conference this coming November in Shanghai, I would like to offer the following comments on what this important theme means to me.

I first want to offer contextual comments that set the backdrop for what I am about to express. An important aspect of ICOM's organic documents is the very broad definition given to the term 'museum'. For ICOM this term encompasses many institutional forms and can include 'museums' as we knew them historically and conventionally for much of the 19th and 20th century—the great receptacles for collections once held privately and subsequently turned over to private or governmental institutions to be held in perpetuity for the benefit of the public.

As the Director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), I certainly was familiar with this museum model. The NMAI held a vast collection, some 800,000 objects, of the cultural patrimony of the Native peoples of the Americas, and a central purpose of the institution was the collection's care. But from the beginning, the NMAI, museologically, intended to be something different from the standpoint of mission and strategic direction—and those intentions bring me to the subject of 'museums and social harmony.'

The National Museum of the American Indian represented a very specific effort to create a 'museum as forum'. In its particular case, the 'forum' addressed the Native peoples, communities, and cultures of the Americas, past and present. Through its exhibitions and public programming, including extensive collaborations and partnerships directly with contemporary Native communities, the NMAI's purpose was to create a gathering place and civic space—a 'forum'—for conversation, discussion and debate, even controversy, regarding the history and contemporary life and experience of the Native peoples of the Americas. In this way, the NMAI transcended the historical boundaries and definitions of a 'museum' to become a more thoroughly public institution—a 'community and cultural centre' rather than a museum in the conventional sense.

In doing so the NMAI became an important social and cultural vehicle for promoting and maintaining 'social harmony' in the truest and most valuable sense. Through the broadness and the inclusiveness of the discussion and discourse it promoted, the seeds of a new and mutual understanding and respect were planted. Most important, that new understanding and respect created the possibility for cultural reconciliation in the Americas between Native and non-Native peoples that, indeed, might serve as the basis for future social harmony in place of a long and troubled previous history.

Beyond the specific experience of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, my real point, in interpreting the phrase 'museums and social harmony', is that all museums in the 21st century have this same potentiality

regardless of their specific subject focus—whether it is history, science, or art. In the United States, as elsewhere, contemporary society is constantly in search of vehicles—‘safe places’—for the consideration and debate of social and cultural questions and issues that need resolution and reconciliation if, ultimately, ‘social harmony’ is to be achieved and preserved.

I do not pretend that museums alone are capable of shouldering this considerable social and cultural challenge, but I believe the vision and conception seminal and worthy of consideration as a matter of 21st century museology and, more importantly, social responsibility. Social harmony, whether local or global, requires the capacity, culturally and socially, to eliminate boundaries that divide—and I hope and trust that museums, in the future, will advance this noble aspiration.