

# Universal Museums

## The Universal Museum: a Special Case?

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> The Declaration by some of the world's leading museum directors on the importance and value of universal museums deserves our detailed attention. ICOM has already taken the initiative in promoting debate through a special session of the Advisory Committee chaired by Alissandra Cummins, in June 2003. Three directors of museums who in different ways could claim the universality of their collections, addressed the subject. Summaries of their papers appear in this issue of *ICOM News*.

> The concept of universality is embodied at the origin of museums. As we know them today, museums originated in the eighteenth century encyclopaedic movement of the so-called European Enlightenment. The British Museum and the Louvre are typical in this respect. As the 1753 Act establishing the former states: "all arts and sciences have a connection with each other...". Cogent historical arguments could be invoked for the preservation of such assemblages of their time.

> Other eighteenth and early nineteenth century museums reflect the part played by the nation concerned, or the circumstances that trade, industry or location have contributed to the character they exhibit today. Their role is equally significant.

> The real purpose of the Declaration was, however, to establish a higher degree of immunity from claims for the repatriation of objects from the collections of these museums. The presumption that a museum with universally defined objectives may be considered exempt from such demands is specious. The Declaration is a statement of self-interest, made by a group representing some of the world's richest museums; they do not, as they imply, speak for the "international museum community". The debate today is not about the desirability of "universal museums" but about the ability of a people to present their cultural heritage in their own territory.

> This is not new. Museums of national identity had developed alongside their "universal" counterparts from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The appropriate location for the cultural property of a people has exercised museums at least for the last two hundred years. The national museum collects material from a region and the regional museum houses collections which would be highly significant in a local museum. There is no satisfactory solution to this sort of dilemma although different nations have adopted different approaches. In these cases, however, the legal and political structures of the particular country allow such matters to be determined.

**A "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" was drafted in December 2002 and signed by 19 major museums from Europe and North America. Its publication gave rise to some debate on the restitution of works held in these collections which have been constituted over many centuries, as well as on the wider responsibilities of museums today. We publish here the "Declaration" in its entirety (see p. 4), accompanied by several responses**

> Not unrelated to this issue of the appropriate location for cultural property is the nature of political boundaries, which are subject to change, as Central and Southern Europe have experienced recently. Such change often generates a heightened awareness of the significance of museum collections in establishing national and cultural identity.

This situation is no different from that pertaining in a number of African nations except that often much of the cultural heritage has been dispersed. In such contexts, though, the issues are international and covered by such legislation as there is, which is not mandatory in any country. It is here that the goodwill of the true international museum community is paramount.

> ICOM promotes a positive approach to these issues. Its *Code of Ethics for Museums* encourages the development of partnerships with museums where a significant part of the cultural heritage has been lost. It advocates that dialogue be initiated that might lead to the return of cultural property and it encourages prompt and responsible steps be taken where specific requests are made. It particularly encourages this activity at a professional rather than a political level.

> The generalised statement of the Declaration provides no commitment whatsoever by the individual museums. While some have had policies on these issues and on illicit traffic for decades – for example, the British Museum since 1972 and the Berlin State Museums from 1976 – an unequivocal statement by each museum on the matter is a vital step in establishing credibility and confidence in the international museum community.

> This will not stop claims for the repatriation of cultural property. But each such claim should be examined by the parties concerned with regard to all the circumstances.

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