

## The known dilemma



**Provocative questions raised by Brazilian museum actors resonate across borders by Andrea Bueno Buoro, anthropologist and director of Intermuseus, and Claudia Porto, museologist, board member of COMCOL and associate consultant for Intermuseus**

The Brazilian Museums Statute (1), published in 2013, establishes that a museum is 'a non-profit-making institution which preserves, investigates, communicates, interprets and displays, for purposes of preserving, studying, researching, educating, contemplating and tourism, sets and collections of historic, artistic, scientific, technical or cultural value, open to the public, to serve society and for its development'.

'To serve society and for its development' may be interpreted in many ways. There is no small value in a museum itself, devoted to history, to the cultural and social heritage of the population and communities; and to developing exhibitions, courses, publications and other cultural products and services for society. This relationship is becoming ever more pluralistic, democratic, dialogical and collaborative, as museum professionals drop their guard and open their arms to other forms of educating, interacting and integrating museums with their audiences and their non-audiences. For all these actions, it is important to invest in knowledge and in the interpretation of the collections – recalling that both knowledge of the collection and the ability to interpret and re-interpret it will

bring greater rewards when an egalitarian relationship is established between museum specialists and ordinary people off the street.

### **Redefining museum roles**

The role and social function of museums are put into question as a challenge to be faced in order to have institutions that are more organic and have a closer relationship with society. This theme had already been addressed before the Santiago Declaration (1972), but since then, the debate has been broadened and intensified, with the New Museology movement and the precepts of Social Museology, for example. But if the complexity of society and the existing questions about the full development of individuals, populations and cultures are increasing exponentially, the ways in which museums are facing these challenges are still developing at a slow pace, stirring up meetings and debates in the field.

Museums find themselves ever more challenged and pressured on various fronts. On one hand, how to position themselves and maintain their recognition in an accelerating, multidimensional, multicultural world in which knowledge and culture are expressed in more diverse languages and are constantly transforming? On the other hand, how to deal with social, economic and environmental challenges that are arriving at the doors of museums (and within them), and which expose the contradictions of a world that is at once post- and pre-modern, technological, yet profoundly unequal?

Museums are not a panacea providing hope for an answer or a solution to humanity's problems. But it is no longer of use to leave these institutions solely with the role of collecting, caring for, treating and returning to society symbolic interpretations of the challenges and obstacles faced, for review. Museums will take on even greater relevance when all of these actions are carried out without limiting them to academic knowledge (alone), the scope of their territory and their usual audience. It is necessary to listen, dialogue, challenge, build, rebuild, create esteem, innovate and connect.

After all, if the country suddenly awoke to huge signs reading 'This museum is closing' on the doors of all of its museums, who would prevent this from happening? What sections of the population would actually mobilise beyond indignation and shared regrets on social media? And around which museums would this outrage be organised?

We asked these questions recently to guide the debates leading to the creation of one of the Intermuseum (2) programmes. These are not rhetorical questions, nor are they asked only for museums in the Brazilian context: a campaign such as 'Museums Matter', carried out by the UK Museums Association, effectively highlights the need for museums to actively face these questions; currently in the US, museums and other cultural institutions are preparing to 'prove' their relevance due to insecurity in the face of recent political changes; and generally, in recent years, the global economic crisis has led to the closure of museums in many countries, including Brazil.

### **An open-door policy**

If a museum isn't recognised as a social actor, which has a place, a role and an active position in the modern life of the average person, it may remain a self-centred, traditional institution, ready to 'welcome' its 'visitors', but viewed as having limited value in society.

In order to consider a more modern identity for the museum, at the end of 2016, Intermuseum carried out an exercise with the museums and non-governmental organisations advocating for women's rights in the Brazilian state of São Paulo. It was proposed that they undertake a curatorship of representative digital images of items from collections that would help them amplify their voices and claims concerning these issues.

It was surprising to see that the institution 'museum' was questioned by an important figure in the protection of women's rights, even before the images could be shown to her. She had a traditional view of museums as icons of thought and hegemonic knowledge of western culture, contributing to the expropriation and archiving of cultural assets and expressions of non-western peoples and societies, and the naturalisation of differences.

We know that this position is gradually being overcome by even the most traditional museums. Despite this, in our exercise, the image of museums as elitist institutions, removed from the social demands that can be heard on the streets today, prevailed: it was only after long discussions that the participant would change her view of the collection shown and recognise that it allowed voices and questions to be amplified and women empowered to defend their rights.

Today, different social groups are knocking on the doors of all types of museums with wide-ranging questions – from the rights of women and refugees to the environmental impact of climate change, from political twists and turns to the fragility of local economies, from the challenges of the new digital world to the silence around contested histories. It is up to each museum to open its doors, or not – and, beyond opening them, to leave them open and go out onto the streets, joining individuals, communities and social groups and allying themselves with society in the search for development that overcomes inequality, and recognises in all individuals their specificities and possibilities.

We stated that museums are not a panacea for solving society's local or global issues. They are not, and it would be dangerous and cruel to believe that they can resolve problems of the magnitude pointed out in the previous paragraph. But whether large or small, museums have assets that can lead them to play key roles in facing the challenges of society.

Museums' collections are among their most important assets, allowing them to address history as well as everyday, trivial, incomplete or contested histories – the latter, proposed by ICOM as the theme for International Museum Day 2017. Museums know how to do this, and to do it with responsibility. Museums well connected in their territories use this skill to construct networks whose strength lies not in each knot of the web, but in the web as a whole. These networks multiply, replicate and use all of these stories, forming an overarching, and powerful, mosaic. Together with professionals from different areas – anthropology, museology, communications, marketing, architecture, digital technology and more – Intermuseum is working on developing programmes in Brazil to advocate for the importance of museums as actors for social development. It does so by working with different segments of society, including non-audiences, as well as social movements and civil society organisations. Multiple perspectives come to improve the connection among all of these social actors, museums included, from the inside of their collections out and vice-versa.

We know that there are many factors that can threaten a museum with closure, including financing, sustainability, personnel, quality of management and more. But we believe that those museums that position themselves side by side with their communities, that offer their spaces and leave their comfort zones to listen to others and work with them, may run a slightly smaller risk, as nobody can say that they only deal with muses from a bygone temple.

1. Presidential Decree No. 8.124 of 17 October 2013, available in Portuguese

at: <http://pesquisa.in.gov.br/imprensa/jsp/visualiza/index.jsp?data=18/10/2013&jornal=1&pagina=1&totalArquivos=200>

2. Intermuseum is a non-profit civil association with headquarters in Sao Paulo, Brazil, which has as its objective to foment, stimulate and develop policies, programmes, projects and museological,



cultural and socio-environmental activities for promoting social development through museums. Key associate consultants for Intermuseus projects are architect and museologist Renato Baldin and anthropologist and museologist Joana Tuttoilmondo. More information (in Portuguese): <http://www.intermuseus.org.br/>