



## **ICOM – ICFA Annual Meeting, Malta, 4-8 october 2011**



### **The Mediterranean as a Hub for Artistic Ideas**

This meeting 2011 was organized by ICOM Malta, in particular by the Board member of ICFA, Theresa Vella, together with Fondazjoni Patrimonju Malti.

### **Programme:**

#### **Tuesday 4th October:**

19.00 : Registration and Welcome at Grandmaster's Palace and tour of this palace by Theresa Vella



Grandmaster's Palace

### Wednesday 5th October:

Study day at Palazzo Parisio (Naxxar)



Palazzo Parisio, Naxxar

09.00 - 09.20 Welcome

09.20 - 12.15 Key note Speaker

Presentation of Papers on **'The Mediterranean as a Hub for Artistic Ideas'**

14.00 – 15.30 Round Table Discussion

15.30 - 16.00 Tour of Palazzo Parisio

16.30 - 17.30 ICFA board meeting

17.30 - 18.30 ICFA general assembly meeting and board elections

18.30 ICFA board leaves Palazzo Parisio

19.30 Grand Harbour boat night tour. Lecture about the Harbour and Fortifications

20.30 Dinner at Valletta Waterfront

**Thursday 6th October:**

Walking tour of Valletta: The Malta Experience, The Mediterranean Conference Centre, St. John's Cathedral and Museum.

Afternoon: National Museum of Fine Arts, Casa Rocca Piccola.



Casa Rocca Piccola

**Friday 7th October:**

Walking tour of Birgu: Fort St Angelo ou The Inquisitor's Palace, Maritime Museum.



Birgu

Afternoon: Hagar Qim and Mnajdra Temples.



Mnajdra temple

**Saturday 8th October:**

Walking tour of Mdina: Cathedral, Museum and Palazzo Falson.



Mdina



Mdina, Palazzo Falson

## Minutes

The conference had as theme “The Mediterranean as a hub for artistic ideas”.

Topic: The Mediterranean has always been, a significant location for the interaction of cultures and people of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Located between Europe, Africa and Asia, the Mediterranean has provided significant trade routes throughout history which continue today. From pre-historic times these trade routes have enabled artists and craftspeople to trade and culturally exchange ideas, political and religious thought, and inspire artistic influences hailing from the different continents which border the Mediterranean.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, Malta, St John's Cathedral

The conference The Mediterranean as a Hub for Artistic Ideas sought to explore the artistic ideas which converged within, and spread from, the Mediterranean. Papers focused on artists who visited, worked in or drew inspiration from the Mediterranean and who took back elements drawn from the Mediterranean to their home countries. Other themes included art collecting within the Mediterranean context and art collections whose theme was the Mediterranean, the Grand Tour, and its influence on artistic commissions, the art trade and transportation of artworks to mainland Europe, religious and pilgrim routes and the influence of the Orient on lands bordering the Mediterranean. Papers discussing modern and contemporary art in and around the Mediterranean was also included.

The theme was afforded in 6 lectures,

- ✓ Giovanni Bonello, *The Mediterranean as a hub for artistic ideas*.
- ✓ Klaus Weschenfelder, *The Coburg Hedwig Beaker- the career of a glass from Mediterranean origin in art and history*.
- ✓ Theresa Zammit Lupi, *A journey through the l'Isle Adam manuscripts: a supreme example of 16th century bookmaking*.
- ✓ Anne Aaserund, *Hans Johann Federik Berg, Norway's first Orientalist and Watercourist*.
- ✓ Giampaolo Pes, *Oriental fascination in Italy and Italian Artists in the Orient*.
- ✓ Ellen J. Lerberg, *Jens Thiis, young man on a Grand Tour*.

## **Round Table and discussions – Research and Fine Arts Collections**

Panel: Giuliana Ericani (Chair of ICFA, ICOM Italy), Theresa Vella (ICOM Malta), Ellen Lerberg (ICOM Norway), Klaus Weschenfelder (ICOM Germany), Marion Tenbusch (ICOM France), Galina Andreeva (ICOM Russia)

Each panelist presented the position in their country as regards the role of research within Fine Art collections.

**Giuliana Ericani** delivered the opening address, during which she pointed out that this was the right time to consider the theme of the Round Table (i.e. Research and Fine Art Collections). Due to the current economic climate which is resulting in declining museum visitor numbers it is time to reconsider the role of research.

**Theresa Vella** made the following points during her presentation:

- Research is an underexploited resource as regards visitors to Museums.
- The situation in the past was that there was no space and time for research by curators so instead students were encouraged to take up areas of research focusing on holdings in the Museums. This had the double advantage of serving both as a way of enhancing the knowledge about the collections but also as a means of museum outreach.
- Nowadays museums are obliged to research not only to enhance the information about their collection but also as a means to bring in new and more discerning audiences.
- It is up to the curators to make a case for more time and space to be allocated for them to be able to research.
- Libraries in museums need to be improved for the sake of public outreach and as a resource for the staff's research and it is not a good idea to have museum libraries centralized in one location away from the Museum. The Library has to be in the Museum.
- Digitisation is a new aspect which provides an unbeatable way to make the Museum collections know worldwide and ongoing research must embrace this new medium and work effectively with it.

**Klaus Weschenfelder** made the following points during his presentation:

- Museums tend to look inwards and focus on their collections rather than on major new research in collaboration with other institutes, such as universities (for example: Approximately every 3 years one department within his museum will produce a collection catalogue).
- Expert advice has recently been sought to examine the research situation within museums and it was found that the smaller museums tended to neglect research.
- The role of the curator is that of stimulator to encourage students to focus on research within the museum's collection.
- As curatorial staff is limited, independent experts are engaged to research collections or Ph.D. students are encouraged to take up a research area focusing on a collection or artifact.

- Accessibility, or lack of accessibility (such as when objects had been treated with noxious materials and are now a health hazard to whoever handles them) is another factor in hindering research.
- Databases can bridge the gap between Museums and other institutions getting them to work together on one project (eg. Veste Coburg is working in conjunction with the National Portrait Gallery and other institutions on an online portrait index which is an aid to researchers. The downside of it is that it is expensive).
- Although there are research institutes, such as the Volkswagenstiftung, which encourages and invests in research, smaller museums who want to make use of these opportunities cannot as they also have to match funding with funds which they simply do not have. - In the past philanthropic organizations funded research. Nowadays although they still do so they now expect more tangible results and impose more stringent conditions, such as requiring an intercultural aspect in the research and the engagement of cross media.

**Galina Andreeva** made the following points during her presentation:

- A big debate is currently raging in Russia whether research should be done in Universities rather than in Museums, but this is a pity as curators and academics should both be doing research.
- The two roles, that of academic and curator, should not be split as the proper investigation of a work of art entails so many aspects which both can contribute to, starting with attribution, historic research, meaning, proper cataloguing and finally interpretation of the artwork. The research function must therefore not be removed from the curator's role.
- There are new fields of knowledge which affect research (such as scientific investigations) that need to be learnt by a curator, and curators need to continue to update their knowledge.
- Museums housing historic artefacts have to compete with contemporary art galleries for their audiences. The Ashmolean gives an excellent example of how one can adopt installation, new media, etc to present old artefacts.
- Museums need to also research how far to use modern technology, displays and applications. It is important to monitor what is useful and what is actually affordable.
- The objects and the collection itself remain the curator's priority, however, the curator must also research novel methods and explore new, brave ideas of how to present an idea or objects to the public (eg: a recent exhibition at the Pushkin Museum explored how the designer Christian Dior was inspired by Art. The Pushkin curators were reluctant to work on this novel and unorthodox idea so independent curators were engaged, with very successful results). - Museums must also research about audiences, trends, etc. Some museums have research centres or, as is the case with the Pushkin Museum, external experts are invited to research these factors and to give advice on the results as the Museum curators were reluctant to do so themselves.
- All of the above shows that new types and levels of research, other than purely academic and art historical, are required in Museums nowadays.

**Ellen Lerberg** made the following points during her presentation:

- Museum visitors have become more demanding. - Museums lack the personnel and time to do the research. Curators are expected to dedicate 20% of their time to research but in reality this is not possible as the day is mostly taken up by a number of pressing matters which are unrelated to research. - Effectively few studies result from Museum research.
- Temporary travelling exhibitions are hosted in their museums, but are not generated by their own museum. This is a pity as the collection of the museum is rich enough to generate exhibitions which could be curated by the Museum's own curators.

**Marion Tenbusch** made the following points during her presentation:

- The RMN is a centre for research linked to Museums whose mission is to put on exhibitions, produce catalogues, publish scientific work, and disseminate knowledge.
- Exhibitions in bigger museums are curated by in-house curators with the contribution of University professors.
- Major exhibitions open up to other professionals usually from different countries, who are able to demonstrate new angles of research. Conferences to present new research are normally organized to accompany the exhibition
- Interns and students assist Museum curators, although sometimes the research of graduate students, such as Ph.D. students, is used as the basis for an exhibition.
- The RMN also have online databases which help disseminate information to researchers and specialists – there are now 10 databases, with the first having been launched in 2004. Databases are constantly updated.
- Other French museums have now put up databases.
- Digitisation is fully supported by the French Ministry of Culture and the State in general.

**Giuliana Ericani** made the following points during her presentation:

- In Italy the role of the University in research was very important until 1995. Museums, on the other hand, did not have enough money for their own research but sometimes they managed to issue catalogues when external funding was sourced. In 1995 changes occurred in the University system which lessened the role of research and the emphasis was placed on didactics. - There is no research institute per se in Italy.
- Up to 1994 Museums were not regulated by a specific law, but in 1994 a law was enacted regulating Museums and giving them a distinct legal personality. This affected the way Museums came to perceive themselves. They understood that research was no longer only academic but was also about the collection and how to present it to the public.
- There are Museums which fall under the Ministry of Culture and this entity has its own research function, while there are other Museums which fall under Municipalities and which have to work alone on their own research.
- The state of research is linked with financial resources and at the moment, due to the economic crisis, research is just not possible in museums. The priority has now shifted to keeping museums open.

- Private foundations continue to organize blockbuster-type exhibitions but these are not academic in nature and they in fact do not use museum professionals but independent researchers. They aim at blockbuster exhibitions rather than academically sound exhibitions.
- ICOM Italy is preparing a document about the position of Museums during the financial crisis.
- The main field of research that should in future be focused on is new settings (ie. how to present the collection in a new way to the public). In this manner it will also help extend knowledge on heritage. As museum professionals we need to change our point of view on research and need to make the presentation of the collection our main mission, the Ashmolean's new arrangement being a case in point.

### **Additional interventions by the panel and the audience:**

#### **Stephen Lloyd (ICOM, UK):**

- The current climate in Britain for Museums is affected by the austerity drive and Museums have had to cut their running costs by as much as 16%. As a result the opportunity for curators to research has diminished considerably.
- The concept of cultural diplomacy, which is developed to a great degree in France, finds no equivalent in Britain.
- The Ashmolean, being a University Museum, is by definition a high research institution but it is the exception. Otherwise other museums, have had to reduce the number of curators and therefore less research can be done. The trend in Museums is to become more didactic.
- Digitisation is of great importance in this context as it takes research out of the Museum and opens up the possibility for other scholars to contribute to databases. Some examples of the possibilities of digitization are the database created by the British Museum's department of prints and graphics, the NICE project (curatorial driven database, funded by DCMS, etc,) and the Public Catalogue Foundation which is a charitable foundation which has set up a database intended to catalogue all paintings in British public collections which obviously requires the collaboration of curators in the various Museums.

**Giuliana Ericani :**

- University Professors think that it is the role of the University, rather than of Museum curators, to promote research. This is symptomatic of the traditional divide between Museums and Universities which has been the cause of friction in the past.

**Galina Andreeva:**

- It is important to note that curators researching for exhibitions have produced new ground breaking research.
- Turf wars between the Universities and Museums are negative and should be avoided.
- The art market in Russia is also a significant new player in all of this. The art market emerged only relatively recently in the post-Soviet period. It has pushed up the price of Russian art. It is also important that research on the art market is undertaken to track what artefacts are changing hands.

**Samantha Fabry (ICOM Malta):**

- The responsibility of the curator has changed dramatically. In the past curators were able to spend time researching, but with the increasing new demands on curators, research time has diminished.
- Research needs to expand and must take into consideration new research by other professionals such as restorers and conservators. It is imperative that in the undertaking of research, the researcher does not remain territorial and inward looking.

**James Licari (Curator, ICOM Malta)**

- It is not just curators, but also other professionals within the Museum who can contribute to research.
- Scientific studies are important and need to be included as part of the research project.
- It is also important to involve the younger generation as there is still a lack of young professionals contributing to research.
- Exhibitions should also be increasingly targeted at young people and include the contribution of Universities.

**Francesca Balzan (Museum Curator, Malta)**

- Crowdsourcing is a new phenomena which can be applied to Museums. In using crowdsourcing the general public is asked to digitally contribute to knowledge about artefacts or to help in some manner with the cataloguing of a Museum's collection. The V&A and the Smithsonian have already used crowd sourcing effectively. Is this the way forward or are we risking taking on information which may not be reliable as it is produced by non-professionals?
- The role of volunteers in research should be considered since Museum Curators have less time and resources to engage in research.

**Giuliana Ericani :**

- Research which is undertaken jointly between different museums can increase the output of research and will increase the public's interest.
- Proposal to make Malta a centre for research on the artistic links in the Mediterranean. This centre could be based at the Palace, Valletta.



Malta, Traditionnal Architecture