

Donatella Biagi Maino, Giuseppe Maino, Isber Sabine

Museums as a tool for intercultural dialogue with refugees and migrants

*Everyone has the right freely to participate
in the cultural life of the community,
to enjoy the arts and to share
in scientific advancement and its benefits.*

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Introduction

In today's society, migratory and reception/inclusion phenomena require the awareness that the individual no longer has a well-defined identity. Faced with the risk of losing it and no longer having any, the migrant can and must assume multiple identities, from that of origin to those of the new reality of which he/she is a guest and to which he/she can usefully contribute with his/her own experience of life and knowledge. In the same way, the citizen of the host society can and must enrich him/herself culturally and not only by contact with

other cultural realities, thus acquiring new identities in addition to and complement his/her own.

More than fifty years ago, in April 1968, the Club of Rome was founded by the Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei and the Scottish chemist and scientific advisor Alexander King, bringing together a small international group of people from the fields of academia, civil society, diplomacy and industry at Villa Farnesina in Rome. Central to the initiative was Peccei's concept of the "problematic", namely that facing the problems of mankind-environmental deterioration, poverty, endemic ill-health, urban blight, criminality, in isolation or as "problems capable of being solved in their own terms", was doomed to failure, since all of them are strongly interrelated. In Peccei's opinion, "it is this generalized meta-problem (or meta-system of problems) which we have called and shall continue to call the 'problematic' that inheres in our situation"¹.

In 1972, the first report to the Club of Rome was released about the *Limits to Growth*², facing the exponential economic and population growths with a finite supply of world resources. It is one of the first attempts to deal with planetary emergencies, to bring these problems to the public's attention and to raise awareness of them.

On another side, in 2000, the biologist Eugene Stormer and the chemist Nobel prize winner Paul Crutzen introduced the concept of the Anthropocene³ to define the Earth's most recent geological period as being human influenced. This is based on overwhelming evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, bio-spheric and other earth

¹ Peccei, Aurelio; Hasan Özbekhan; Erich Jantsch; Alexander Christakis: The predicament of mankind. Quest for structured responses to growing worldwide complexities and uncertainties: the PROPOSAL, Club of Rome report 1970, p. 31.

² Meadows, Donatella H.; Dennis L. Meadows; Joergen Randers; William W. Behrens III: *The Limits to Growth*. A Report for the Club of Rome's project on the Predicament of Mankind. New York: Universe Books 1972.

³ Crutzen, Paul. J.; Eugene F. Stoermer: The "Anthropocene". In: IGBP Global Change Newsletter 41 (May 2000), pp. 17-18.

system processes are now altered by humans. In 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group (including historians for the first time) of the International Union of Geological Sciences agreed that it differs from the Holocene and began in the year 1950.

These two major issues – i.e., the limited availability of resources on our planet and the continuing, unpredictable consequences on the global climate, on the supply of food and water, modification of the environment by man – are, among other things such as poverty and economic inequalities, wars, and terrorism, the original cause of the massive migratory phenomena of these last decades.

Therefore, migration represents nowadays a planetary emergency. It is amplified by the demographic problem that sees a continuous decreasing of births and a negative evolution of the European population, whereas in Asia and above all in Africa, an exponential demographic increase leads to a dramatic situation related to the scarce resources and the enormous social and economic difficulties.

According to the *World Migration Report 2020*⁴, in 2019 the number of international migrants was globally 272 million (3.5% of the world's population); the total refugee population was 25.9 million in 2018, of which 20.4 million refugees were under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and 5.5 million were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. It is worth noting that 52% of the global refugee population was under 18 years of age.

The number of internally displaced persons due to violence and conflict reached 41.3 million, which is the highest number on record since the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre began monitoring in 1998. The Syrian Arab Republic had the highest number of people

⁴ McAuliffe, Marie; Binod Khadria: *World Migration Report 2020*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva 2019. Online available at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf.

displaced (6.1 million), followed by Colombia (5.8 million) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (3.1 million).

Prior to the disruptions to migration flows caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the number of international migrants had grown robustly over the past two decades. The United Nations estimate in the report on *International Migration 2020 - Highlights*⁵ that the number of persons living outside of their country of origin reached 281 million in 2020; between 2000 and 2010, the number of international migrants increased by 48 million, with another 60 million added between 2010 and 2020. Much of this increase was due to labour or family migration. Humanitarian crises in many parts of the world also contributed, with an increase of 17 million in the number of refugees and asylum seekers between 2000 and 2020. In 2020, the number of persons forcibly displaced across national borders worldwide reached 34 million, twice as much as in 2000.

Europe was the region with the largest number of international migrants in 2020, amounting to 87 million people. These are impressive and significant numbers of epochal changes. Those changes require innovative approaches and solutions to encourage the reception of migrants and to achieve an authentic intercultural dialogue. These approaches and solutions are crucial to avoid social conflicts, the rise of racism and intolerance, the creation of a fertile ground for religious and political fanaticisms and therefore proselytism for terrorist organisations. They are also meant to avoid a seemingly easy integration or assimilation bringing no solution to the problems which then recur in the second or third generations of migrants.

Cultural heritage can be one of the possible keys to answer to this challenge.

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs: *International Migration 2020 – Highlights*. New York: United Nations Publication 2020. Online available at: <https://www.un.org/en/desa/international-migration-2020-highlights>.

Identity and migration

Since cultural heritage is fundamental to defining identity, it is also an important element for the promotion of an intercultural dialogue. Knowing and appreciating the creations of other people and different cultural traditions is important for a positive welcome of migrants and for mutual understanding between old and new citizens. Museums, as places of cultural cross-fertilisations and encounters, must play a major role in the integration of immigrants through knowledge and understanding of cultural heritage.

The definition of identity is a crucial aspect in the personal and social definition of oneself. It is deeply linked to the museum's institution where histories of civilisations, people, cultural assets, and traditions are presented and preserved also for future generations.

The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has always focused his studies on the uncertainty and precariousness that characterise postmodern society, which he summarises with the metaphor of the “liquid (fluid) society”. Bauman reminds us that we all live on one planet, we belong to an only humanity and calls for the rejection of xenophobia, racism, and nationalism⁶. He points out that, whatever the obstacles, and their apparent enormity, mutual knowledge and the fusion of horizons remain the main way to achieve peaceful and beneficial, collaborative and supportive coexistence for all people. There are no viable alternatives: the “migration crisis” reveals the current state of the world, the destiny we have in common. From the very beginning of modernity, refugees have been knocking on the door of peoples, fleeing the bestiality of wars and despotisms or the ferocity of a life whose only prospect is hunger. For those who live behind that door, refugees have always been foreigners. Those nomads – not by choice, but by the verdict of an inclement destiny –

⁶ Bauman, Zygmunt: *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge (UK): Polity Press 2000.

remind us in an irritating, infuriating and gruesome way of how vulnerable our position in society and how fragile our well-being are.

Proceeding from a different point of view, the anthropologist and ethnologist Marc Augé arrives at similar considerations and to a definition of the concept of identity central to the migratory problem: humanity is now in the grip of a strong fear of the future, due to the vast expansion of the world's population and the considerable migratory phenomena affecting the Western world, as the French scholar outlines⁷. Social balance, security and confidence in the future are thus threatened in the perception of many. Migration, a founding anthropological element of human civilisation, now also takes on the characteristics of revenge against the colonising states. It is opposed to the phenomenon of relocation and mass tourism, which reverses the movement of people and capital. By virtue of this, in our globalised world, governed by unbridled capitalist consumerism, migrants appear as true heroes of the world who uproot themselves from their culture to enter another. The question of identity, both individual and plural, is therefore central: no individual can live in isolation. Political action must therefore guarantee both individual freedoms and relations, in order to avoid a descent into either anarchy or totalitarianism.

Finally, the philosopher and sinologist François Jullien spurs us to frame the real conditions of the possibility of intercultural dialogue⁸ by making a decisive conceptual shift from the notion of identity, which leads to a sterile contrast, to the notion of deviation, which instead activates a fruitful tension between cultures allowing to grasp their respective cognitive resources.

For example, how should we nowadays understand the need for universality historically pursued by Europe? Does it show purely

⁷ Augé, Marc: *Migrazioni. Dialogo con Anna Mateu e Domingo Pujante González*. Rome: Castelvecchi Editore 2018.

⁸ Jullien, François: *L'identità culturale non esiste*. Torino: Einaudi 2018.

Western ethnocentrism, or is it the regulatory ideal of the reason that undergoes the plan of rights and the possibility of living together? It is therefore well established that similarities and analogies cannot be the basis for the sense of the common. Or rather, there is no “common basis” or “minimum element” of consent which can provide a guarantee of mutual recognition and care among human beings. Jullien's desired common position does not stem from an agreement on differences concluded upstream or downstream, but from a willingness to open our prospects, to make them permeable to other influences without renouncing the own positions, but by marking themselves against their one-sidedness.

Museums and cultural identity

The above-mentioned considerations led us to confirm our hypothesis, namely the fundamental role that culture and cultural heritage can have in terms of the reception and inclusion of migrants in a different social, historical and economic context. Only through a cultural approach and knowledge of their cultural heritage can new arrivals understand the values and ways of life of the host country. Furthermore, when immigrants rediscover heritage elements from their own countries that are on display in the Western museums, it can help them to recover a self-esteem that is often lost due to their situation of helplessness.

Museums are thus called upon to take up new functions, both informative and formative, towards not only migrants – who become a large new catchment area – but also towards the local population, invited to revisit the traditional museum in a different original perspective of a cultural melting pot.

In the academic year 2019-2020, the Institute of Advanced Studies (ISA) of the University of Bologna promoted the ISA topic “Identity: one, none, one hundred thousand”, a cycle of initiatives dedicated to



Fig. 1: A session of the International Conference on Hospitality and Cultural Heritage, organized by the Institute of Advanced Studies of the Bologna University, Bologna, Italy, 24 October 2019.

the problem of the continuous definition and redefinition of the different identities that characterise people, society, and knowledge. This cycle opened with an international conference⁹ entitled *ABC – Accoglienza e Beni Culturali – Hospitality and Cultural Heritage* held in Bologna on 24 October 2019.¹⁰

This conference was the starting point for an ISA research project entitled “Fluid identities, historical and current representations and

⁹ This conference was organized by Donatella Biagi Maino and Giuseppe Maino.

¹⁰ The proceedings of the conference have been recently published: *Hospitality and Cultural Heritage*. Eds. Donatella Biagi Maino, Giuseppe Maino. Rome: Tabedizioni 2021.

perspectives”, to which many participants to the Bologna workshops contributed. This project led to the establishment of a multidisciplinary working group as well as an interdisciplinary laboratory set up by the University of Bologna in collaboration with Heritage for Peace¹¹, an NGO chaired by Isber Sabrine, which aimed to demonstrate how cultural heritage can act as a tool for social integration and how it has already served this purpose in the past.

Two projects have been implemented: one is called “Multaka” and is carried out by museums in Berlin, Germany, the other is called “Abuab” and was initiated in Girona, Spain.

Let us first consider the Multaka project. Salma Jreige of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, spoke¹² about “Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point and the Europe-Wide Multaka Network”. The following museums participate in the Multaka project:

- Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum),
- Pergamonmuseum,
- Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum for Islamic Art) and Vorderasiatisches Museum (Near East Museum), and
- Bode-Museum.

The complete name of the project¹³ is “Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums”. On a concrete basis, Syrian and Iraqi refugees are trained to become museum guides, so that they can provide free guided tours of Berlin’s museums for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in their native language. *Multaka* is the Arabic word for “meeting place” and represents the exchange of various cultural and historical experiences.

¹¹ <https://www.heritageforpeace.org/>

¹² Her talk to the International Conference on Hospitality and Cultural Heritage, Bologna, Italy, 24 October 2019.

¹³ Weber, Stefan: Pulling the Past into the Present: Curating Islamic Art in a Changing World, a Perspective from Berlin. In: International Journal of Islamic Architecture 7 (2018), pp. 237-261.

The programme seeks to exchange different cultural and historical experiences. The Deutsches Historisches Museum, in particular, wants to present to refugees the history and culture of Germany and to provide an overview of its educational crises and processes of historical renewal. Guided tours focus mainly on the years after 1945 and the period of national reconstruction after the trauma of World War II. Every first, second and third Wednesday of the month, Syrian guides provide tours in German and Arabic, every fourth Wednesday in English and Arabic. Multaka-tours are free.

The title of the project is programmatic: the Deutsches Historisches Museum wants to allow refugees to get closer to German culture and history along with their crises and renewal movements. This is a central aspect in the training and preparation of the guides and their following presentations to the museum's visitors.

On the other hand, the objects preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art show the combination and coexistence of different cultures.

Though cultural heritage is essential for defining identity, it is also an element of intercultural dialogue. Knowing and appreciating the wealth of others is important for a positive reception and mutual understanding. Those who arrive can better understand the culture and lifestyle of the destination country through their knowledge of art. Seeing their own culture valued in European countries is important for immigrants, who thus rediscover their roots. As ICOM outlines, "museums have no borders, they have a network"¹⁴, and further, "museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the futures"¹⁵.

The second project mentioned here is called "Abuab", the Arabic word for "doors". The main idea of cultural heritage as a much needed and important tool for social inclusion in our society nowadays, is also the root motivation of this project.

¹⁴ ICOM slogan, www.icom.museum.

¹⁵ Excerpt from the first proposal for a new museum definition, ICOM 2019.

Designed by Isber Sabrine with the NGO Heritage for Peace, Abuab has been proposed by the Milà y Fontanals Institution (part of the Spanish National Research Council CSIC) and the University of Girona, Spain, with the participation of museums in different European cities. It is a project that aims to work on the use of cultural heritage as an instrument for social integration and for intercultural dialogue with refugees and immigrants from the Near East and North Africa. Initially, it provides for visits in Arabic for immigrants in Spanish museums, including training for guides. Above all, its main aim is to integrate women of Islamic culture who are unlikely to integrate into the destination culture. It also aims at carrying out guided tours together with the local population and thus increasing the range of action. Furthermore, a pilot project includes visits in little-known rural areas, i.e., going outside the reference cities such as Madrid, Barcelona and Girona.

As an example, the pilot project led the participants to a rural area of the Catalan Pyrenees, where a group of immigrants living in Barcelona visited the Valls d'Aneu (Aneu Valley), starting from the Ecomuseum of the Aneu Valley in Esterri d'Aneu.

The activities of the project consisted in:

- visiting the romanesque Church of Santa Maria,
- visiting a local fabric of cheeses,
- visiting the village of Esterri d'Aneu,
- conferences about the importance of this project, the immigration in history, presenting the work of some immigrants' associations,
- intercultural concert between immigrants and local people,
- visiting the local Ecomuseum of Esterri d'Aneu.



Fig. 2: Isber Sabrine and participants of the Abuab project in Girona, a project about the use of museums for intercultural dialogue with refugees and immigrants from the Near East and North Africa.

The main objectives of the Abuab project are the following:

- to use the heritage sites in different cities in Spain and Italy as a place where immigrants/refugees can discover the cultural reality of the host society,
- to help and promote intercultural dialogue amongst immigrants/refugees and between them and local society,
- to promote affective and cultural links of immigrants/refugees with the cultural heritage of the host countries,
- to know the feelings of immigrants towards the culture and history of Catalonia and Italy,
- to collaborate in the promotion of associations between immigrants/refugees, facilitating contact with existing associations,

- to contribute to the emancipation of women in the immigrant population, to promote women's access to culture and to promote their network of social interaction,
- to increase the capacity to use cultural heritage as an argument contrary to Islamic fundamentalism and xenophobia in host countries,
- to experiment the use of cultural heritage in the social integration of communities exposed to fundamentalist discourses,
- to strengthen the theoretical and methodological framework of the use of cultural heritage as a tool for the social inclusion of immigrants/refugees.

Conclusions

Culture must question itself on the main themes of the new millennium: poverty, immigration, war, identity. So, what is a museum? A public space! To define it means to take a social and political position, which is very complicated, as the Multaka and Abuab initiatives have shown. This is a task that museums and institutions in charge cannot avoid in this 21st century of planetary emergencies.

Culture is the most important factor for peace and stability of the world and constitutes the set of values that give meaning to the community. Therefore, culture includes all aspects through which a nation dialogues with other cultures.

The reason why it is necessary is as follows: the phenomenon of immigration has become increasingly important in Europe in recent years. The integration of newcomers into their host societies is currently one of the main challenges for governments and civil society. The cultural contrast between immigrants and locals is often a source of tension for both communities. Cultural heritage can be a powerful tool for social integration.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, museums are faced with many difficulties and problems, from pandemics to measures for protection and safeguard of the cultural heritage against both natural and man-made disasters – wars, terrorism, industrial accidents and damage to the environment and climate changes.

In addition, museums have to meet new needs of the public, from eco-museums to the respect towards different cultures. Together with libraries and historical archives, they remain the places for the preservation and transmission to future generations of our knowledge, and above all of our histories. Faced with a global emergency such as exponential population growth and huge migratory phenomena – due to many causes, economic, social, historical, conflicting, etc. – however, museums can represent an invaluable heritage and a unique opportunity for intercultural dialogue, social integration, and enrichment not only for migrants but also for local population.

From this point of view, starting from the 2019 workshop and the comparison of experiences, with the collaboration of the scholars involved, arises the following proposal: to create a network to track down and survey the city of Bologna – which has always been a crossroads of multicultural and international experiences thanks to the presence of the University and the Institute of the Academy of Sciences – the testimonies and the presence of other cultures, in collaboration with the Bologna Museums Institution ruled by the local municipality.

From our personal side, we propose a joint scientific collaboration among museums and research institutes aiming to implement a kind of meta-museum: a network of real and virtual museums on 1) migration, 2) climate change, and 3) risk prevention and management, including multimedia databases in order to share and produce information and resources on these and other topics relevant to planetary emergencies.

In conclusion, we think that a goal is to raise awareness about the essential interdependence between natural and anthropic environment

and cultural heritage. The perception of the historical and social importance of cultural heritage in the face of its vulnerability and cultural differences is crucial. This awareness will help empower all citizens, including the immigrants, and involve them, wherever possible, in protection, conservation and preventive maintenance of the cultural heritage through an active role of museums.