

## Introduction to the conference theme

### Stefan Bohman, ICOM Sweden

Difficult issues at museums or  
difficult heritage at museums,  
difficult questions at museums,  
difficult items at museums

I had already written most of this conference introduction, but by a coincidence I two weeks ago visited Charlottesville, where there had been a riot about taking down a statue of Robert Edward Lee (1807–70), the leading Confederate General during the American Civil War. One person was murdered by right wing demonstrators protesting about taking down the statue.

Then I visited the chapel and museum over Robert E. Lee in Lexington, where he died, very close to Charlottesville. In this museum he is presented as a noble gentleman and a brilliant general, a hero for the whole of the USA. A rather common picture in especially the south of USA. Someone to admire, more or less (fig. 1, p. 20).

But when I visited the very new museum of African Americans in Washington, Robert E. Lee was defined as the general who fought against their freedom, to preserve slavery and expand it, and to split the USA into two nations. Lee with his army killed hundred thousands of North Americans to reach those goals. A completely different story.

The clash between those two stories of the civil war and its general led to death in Charlottesville. But in the Lexington museum you could buy a nice cup with his name, a book about his noble character, and a finger doll for children to play with.

The stories told at the museums and the African American museum where completely different, from separate political, social and cultural views. Perhaps neither of them where false, but there were different decisions about the interpretation of the cultural heritage.

With this introduction I will return to ICOM, and to the conference in Paris 2017. The keynote speaker Chris Whitehead talked about the subject ‘contested history’. And he asked this question: “What stories are told, and what stories are not told?” A question more actual than ever, and as I see it – the central question for this whole conference! Just to give some teasers of what we are going to listen to and discuss here at Dunkers:



Fig. 1: Lee Chapel in Lexington, Virginia: statue of Robert Edward Lee (1807–70) designed by Edward Valentine. Photo: Stefan Bohman, 2017

- » How to handle exhibitions in the Estonian National Museum about the Russian speaking minority? What challenges occurred in the communication with the Russian speaking community?
- » How to balance aesthetical and historical validity above economic growth, for example in the Saga Vax/Silicone Museum in Iceland, where a more sensational exhibition can affect visitors, but the museum staff want a more realistic and distanced narrative.
- » How to present the difficult history about the German presence in Finnish Lapland 1941–44? A dark heritage and difficult history that continues to be a sensitive issue in the local heritage politics.
- » What to do with a painting of a whale hunt in the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, at the same time as whale hunting today is condemned?

I long to hear those and the other presentations!!

There are a lot of museological studies today about museums as ‘memory-institutions’, but not so many about museums as ‘forgetting/omitting-institutions’. To remember and to omit are always the different sides of the same coin! But the problems about contested history, about omitted history and histories are more and more discussed today, also in ICOM. The conference in Paris 2017 is an example of this. We can see it for example in ICOM MEMO and ICOM COMCOL, and in more ICOM committees.

There is rather a lot of research today about heritage in general and about difficult heritage. I will give just some examples. A starting point is David Lowenthal when he in his famous book *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985, 206) writes: “Above all, memory transforms the experienced past into what we think it should have been.”

Cultural heritage can be defined as cultural expressions, material or non-material, that groups in the society decide are important and have a symbolic value interesting enough to be called cultural heritage. Therefore, it shall be protected in a special way.

Cultural heritage is always a matter of choice. Just to make an example: the Finnish researcher Ulla-Maija Peltonen writes in her interesting research about the infected question about memorials from both the red and the white sides in the civil war in Finland 1918. She then asks the very important question: “Who has the right to decide what to be remembered or forgotten from the past?”

Cultural heritage is always a question of power. Who in the society has the right to decide what to be defined as a cultural heritage, and how it shall be interpreted. In my own research about museums in Sweden we can see during our history several actors with a claim to decide about cultural heritage, often fighting each other:

- » Royal court and nobilities, most 17th–19th century.
- » Professional cultural heritage management, with a scientific claim, has grown most during the 20th century.
- » Politicians, both local and central. Always actual.
- » Financiers, those who have the money, that museums more or less must adjust to.
- » The public, as a result of the demand on museums (and their own interest), to attract more and more visitors.

But to be a little more concrete – how does this apply to museums today? Sharon MacDonald is one among other researchers who writes about difficult questions at museums. For example: How museums in Germany and France present the Second World War? One conclusion she makes is that Germany the last years has done a lot to present their role in the war in a complex and problematized way. In comparison, for example, French museums much more talks about the resistance movement than the Vichy reign.

I can see this change in my own research, for example in The Wagner Museum in Bayreuth, where Wagner's antisemitism and his followers' close contact to Hitler was more or less neglected in the former museum installations, but now is accurately presented in the new museum 2016. Now the museum for example will show how Wagner's daughter-in-law Winifred Wagner kept Hitler as an idol picture on her writing desk, and much more.

There have been several projects to inspire museums to present contested history and difficult questions. The Norwegian museum project *BRUDD* is an example, which discussed exhibitions about, for example, the much-criticised whale hunt, about Nazi prisoners in Norway, homosexuality among animals, and more subjects.

In Sweden we had some years ago a project about difficult items in museums, for example how to document and exhibit pornography, instruments made for suicide, items from catastrophes. Can the whole front, a gigantic piece, from the sunken ship *Estonia*, where more than 800 persons died, be a museum object, or is it something else? Some thought it was irreverent to make it just a museum item.

Or this completely different item: It was an infected discussion at the Nordic Museum if pieces from a beggar's tent outside Stockholm were possible to collect and preserve, like this rest from a food package with dirt and all (fig. 2, p. 23). But the discussion also landed in – do the museum want to censor heritage from the poorest in the society!?

In USA, to take just another example, it was the very infected discussion if, and how, to exhibit the plane *Enola Gay*, that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. A discussion that ended in a stop for the exhibition.

Those very concrete questions lead us to the last subject in my little presentation. At the ICOM conference in Paris 2017 Jette Sandahl said in a working seminar: "We need to have strategies and techniques for handling difficult heritage." I fully agree! We must not only discuss how museums handle difficult heritage and contested history in theory and in general, but also more concrete knowledge about how we as museums do it in practice.



Fig. 2: Piece from a beggar's tent outside Stockholm. Photo: O. Wallgren, Riksställningar, 2001

I have been asked to be a little provocative in my presentation, so here is a little contribution from me. First: The Norwegian project *BRUDD* made up a little list of arguments they met from museums, why they could *not* take up more difficult questions or contested history at their museums. Perhaps some of you can recognise yourselves:

- » My God – how politically correct
- » Difficult questions are important – but not here
- » We don't have the time
- » If we had more money...
- » This is not in our museum regulations
- » We must work with our collections
- » Our visitors want a jolly time at the museum

Second: After my research about people museums and their more concrete ways of forgetting/omitting difficult questions about the persons: how do we do in our everyday work in museums with difficult questions and contested history? Just some examples as I have met them:

*Full account.* The museum in exhibitions and other material talks about the difficult questions. But of course – this is always a problem. You can never tell everything, so you must choose what to write and exhibit, even if you want to be as open minded as possible.

*Omitting.* The problematic facts don't exist in the museum's exhibitions or in any other museum material. For example: because the staff has decided that those problems don't belong to the plan for the museum, or that the facts are so spiteful that they can be ignored, even if the public discussion about the problems are wide and important.

*Double bookkeeping.* The museum presents its subject in different ways – one for the ordinary public, without the difficulties, and one for the special interested and experts, where the difficult questions are discussed – for example in books in the museum shop, in special articles on the homepage or in specialized seminars.

*Minimizing.* The problematic facts are presented in the museum, but in a minimized way, perhaps in a remote corner of the museum, often as cold facts without discussing underlying causes, and – as there had been no discussions about it in the society.

*Reduction of responsibility.* The museums claim that everyone did the same. The society during the time 'was just like that', and a person could not do anything else. The historical situation justified a person's or a group's behaviour and makes it therefore less interesting to exhibit.

*Comparison.* The person did really do bad things – but – in comparison to his or her contribution in society it is of lesser importance. As a *successful* writers/composers/artists/politicians etc. the problematic questions about them can be omitted or minimized at the museum.

*Change of subject.* The Museum concentrates on other subjects than the person in spite of that the museum is in his or her name. For example – the main subject of the museum is the architecture, the relatives, the persons clothes, or as an example of how people in general lived during this time.

Can you recognize any of this?

To end where I started: even President Trump commented on the fight about the statue over Robert E. Lee, how to use history and the use of its culture heritage. He said: “So this week, it is Robert E Lee... I wonder, is it George Washington next week? Or is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you really have to ask yourself, where does it stop.”

Yes, where does it stop? This is our responsibility as museum workers to discuss and to take a view on. What stories do we tell, and why? Is history just a bunch of equivalent stories? Of course not – we have a responsibility to form an opinion on how to present both history and its stories: how to interpret the cultural heritage. We have decisions to make. Therefore, this conference is very important!

Welcome!!