

AISTHESIS

DISCOVERING ART WITH ALL THE SENSES

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Supports and publishes studies and research on sensory perception and the accessibility of the cultural heritage



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The Prague document: promoting diversity

Aldo Grassini, President of the Museo Tattile Statale Omero

24 August 2022: a date we shall remember. The ICOM General Assembly in Prague approved a truly revolutionary document which sought a new definition of the concept of Museum. People may object that in fact there has been talk for some time now of the need for the cultural contents of museums to be accessible, inclusive, open to all publics. This is true. But a synthesis so comprehensive and rich in meaning on the part of a prestigious institution such as the ICOM is bound to leave its mark. It is a prediction that the present writer is prepared to make after many decades spent trying, modestly, to break down the wall of indifference, of obdurate conservatism and of a priori refusal to question the sacrosanct assumptions of a museological tradition which clings on stubbornly.

The Prague document speaks of accessibility and inclusion with reference to all the diversities. Indeed, it adds a statement which is in itself revolutionary when it specifies that one of the aims of a museum is to promote diversity. So it is not simply a question of accepting it, respecting it and providing for it; promoting diversity is much more than this: it means considering it a value, an active ingredient of cultural and social growth, an agent for the leavening of that multiform and multi-material dough which we call culture.

This principle expressed in absolute terms must extend beyond any doubt to include the sensory diversity of the visually impaired; and this is where we really come up against some taboos which resist any attempt at rational inquiry. I am referring to the taboo whereby art is the domain of the visual (normally we talk about the visual arts without troubling to ask ourselves if there are other sensory approaches), and the setting up of a museum or exhibition invariably aims exclusively at the most effective display in visual terms.

Fortunately things are changing, but there is still fierce resistance which, if it occasionally makes some modest concession at the theoretical level, then ignores it or plays it down when theory yields to practice.

“Do Not Touch” thus becomes an inescapable corollary, almost the ethical consequence of the indispensable penalization of touch, considered the “pariah” of the senses compared with the nobility of sight. The need to protect the cultural artifact from the inevitable deterioration resulting from manual contact is, in the main, a mere pretext. Indeed, in most cases the objects would be exposed to no danger whatever if carefully handled.

I am concerned to stress that the removal of the “Do Not Touch” taboo not only recognizes, finally, the right of the blind to enjoy culture and art (enshrined in Art. 27, Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948); by implication it also recognizes the value, including the aesthetic value, of tactility; it rescues touch from the ostracism imposed by the old museum culture and attributes to this sense, as to all others, its own cognitive and aesthetic distinction. It is clear that in this way, by restoring to the blind the chance of enjoying the pleasure of beauty, a new way of enjoying art is adumbrated: the tactile approach.

Why should this be of interest only to the visually impaired? Tactility belongs to everyone and its rediscovery restores the natural relation between man and reality, one founded on all the senses and not just on sight.

So it is that a point of difference, a visual impairment, ends up by broadening the cultural horizon for everyone. And how can the new museology fail to be aware of this? How can museum and exhibition organizers carry on blithely in deference to the old canons, considering accessibility as an exclusively motor issue.

In Prague they took the point, and those few lines of the document, approved almost unanimously, will serve as our banner.

The museum according to ICOM

Adele Maresca Compagna, vice-president of ICOM Italia

On 24 August in Prague, the new ICOM definition of a museum, drawn up by the International ICOM Define Committee, was approved almost unanimously. It marks the culmination of a long process of reflection and analysis which has taken stock of the museological debate of recent years and adopted those key terms and concepts which, to judge by the consultations of national and international committees, are most widely shared by the international community.

It has not been an easy process, considering that the very idea of a museum and the forms that they have taken both over time and in different parts of the world are far from identical. What was needed was to identify a common denominator over and above the different conceptions and practices which are influenced by sundry considerations: at times by concrete factors (such as the presence or otherwise of collections of great cultural or natural interest), at other times by particular traditions of artistic production, of conserving and handing down artifacts to future generations, or by a difficult social and economic context on which it is hoped to make a deep impression – I am thinking of the “community” museums of Latin America, deeply aware of the need to involve the indigenous communities in the construction and conservation, as well as the enjoyment, of a heritage inseparable from their identity.

The aim was to briefly highlight the characteristics, the hallmarks, of the museum as institution, its identity, its functions, its modus operandi and purposes (as in the previous definition) while taking note of the transformations of contemporary society and the demands of the new museology, stressing the social role of the museum and its potential to contribute to sustainable development at a local and global level.

The literature as well as a number of international proceedings had already featured some important changes of perspective:

- the broadening of the concept of heritage to include natural heritage, then intangible heritage, and finally, with the Faro Convention of the Council of Europe, the concept of shared heritage;

- a shift of attention by professionals from objects to people; the centrality assigned to the public in the policies and activities of museums;
- the stress on the active role of these institutions in society.

The 2015 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums, their Diversity and their Role in Society had already emphasised that museums:

- must be open places, committed to ensuring physical and cultural access to all, including the most disadvantaged groups;
- are spaces for cultural transmission, intercultural dialogue, learning, discussion and training, education (formal, informal and lifelong), social cohesion and sustainable development;
- contribute to economic development, in particular through cultural and creative industries, tourism, employment.

A New Social Commitment

Without distorting the characteristics and purposes of this cultural institution, the new definition of museum acknowledges these appeals and embraces a vision heavily weighted towards social commitment.

The museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage.

Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

A comparison with the previous definition from 2007 reveals points both of continuity and profound innovation.

The distinguishing characteristics of the museum are confirmed, and in our view it is very important, in a world where instability and precariousness seem to triumph, that the permanent nature of the institution be reaffirmed - to national and local governments, administrators, regional communities. Permanent status is also linked to legal recognition

and an efficient organization capable of safeguarding the heritage, as well as quality cultural programming provided by highly professional staff. It was also essential to stress again the non-profit nature and public service role of museums.

The purposes traditionally ascribed to a museum also remain the same, with some alterations:

- Research is given pride of place since it is considered preparatory and necessary to all other pursuits.
- The term “acquires” is substituted by “collects”, which is more appropriate for a heritage that is intangible or widespread, and distances itself from the proprietorial/possessive relation to the asset.
- “interprets” is inserted alongside “exhibits” by way of drawing attention to the inescapable effort of reprocessing/mediating the manifold meanings and values to be communicated and shared. This is a commitment which naturally takes as its starting point the specialized study of the collections but which should be enhanced through the contribution of other areas of competence (sociological, anthropological, scientific, historical) and the support of educators/mediators prepared to listen to different demands and views represented by persons and groups of people speaking for different cultures, traditions, religious beliefs and sexual orientations, or conditioned by particular fragilities.

The second sentence highlights the outlook and the modus operandi of museums, with a shift – not immediately easy to understand – from the singular to the plural. In all probability the intention is to mark the transition from the general characteristics and typical functions of the institution “museum” as an abstract entity, to the practical work carried out by museum institutions in all their manifold variety.

Fostering Diversity

It is in this part that a number of key words have been inserted which are radically innovative, largely agreed upon by the museum community, and especially dear to the Museo Omero:

- Accessibility and inclusion, which go well beyond the openness to the public of the previous definition.

- Respecting and fostering diversity and sustainability.

Over and above the importance of its collections, the museum thus becomes a space open to all, without physical or cognitive barriers, a workshop where different identities and cultures may grow in mutual knowledge and awareness, a forum for researching and documenting history, the evolution of science and civilizations, but also current local and global issues. The museum takes on an important role in the pursuit of sustainable development goals.

For all this to be achieved, as the definition suggests, it is essential to involve communities and – we would add – to forge strong, lasting alliances with local administrations, with the institutions that go to make up the cultural and social ecosystem – libraries, archives, schools, universities, associations – and the with economic and productive organisations of the region.

Furthermore, to achieve the purposes which the museum sets itself - i.e. education, pleasure, reflection and knowledge-sharing - the ICOM museum definition commits to offering “varied experiences”, and hence to identifying different tools, methods and languages according to the intended target. It is important to bear in mind that the word “experiences” points to a more intense, participatory approach than that associated with a simple visit, and an emotional as well as an intellectual involvement on the part of the visitor, both on site and online.

The use of technology to this end can bring about change of a radically innovative nature. Digitalization, the reproduction of works in high resolution and 3D, enhanced reality, the production of videos and podcasts for educational and recreational purposes, gives access to a wider range of visitors and enables them to take part in person or at a distance, besides extending boundless opportunities for research, communication and creative development. It needs to be clear, though, that these actions cannot be extemporary and must form part of a general strategy designed to offer an overall presentation of the museum and its collections, conducted by means both traditional and innovative, and with contents and detail calibrated to the needs of the different user groups.

To conclude, I believe that ICOM has helped to create a shared understanding internationally, suggesting policies and courses of action to governments, administrators and professionals.

To accommodate this vision to the reality of each individual museum, taking account of its specific mission and the context in which it operates, will mean investing above all in human capital. The museum of the future will come into being only if it can rely on a high level of technical, administrative and specialist expertise – competent people, open-minded and motivated, able to imagine and oversee the change and willing to exercise their own relational and interactive skills inside and outside the museum.

The accessible museum: the National Archaeological Museum of Naples – Experience gained, ongoing projects and future prospects

Paolo Giulierini, Director of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples

Introduction

In recent years the role that museums, and places of culture in general, play in our society has undergone a radical change thanks to the growth of a positive, proactive approach, one eager to enter into discussion and work alongside a diversity of public and private actors – in their local contexts and within the broader national and international politico-cultural framework - as well as being ready to interface, in an informed way, with the digital dimension.

The ICOM approval of the new definition of ‘museum’ on 24 August in Prague endorses this evolution, recognizing a dual mission for these cultural institutions: one that we might describe as “intellectual”, concerned with carrying out research, collecting, conserving, interpreting and exhibiting the tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and one that might more accurately be described as “social”, based on concepts such as accessibility, inclusiveness, diversity, sustainability, community participation: a mission which encounters the needs of society by actively listening to the public, imagining and devising a range of solutions and participatory, hands-on experiences for the widest and most heterogeneous public possible.

The Accessible MANN

The National Archaeological Museum of Naples has been working conscientiously in this direction for some time and - thanks to the new resources and prospects offered by

autonomy - learning from and building on the experience gained over the past twenty years on the subject of cultural mediation in relation to different types of public.

From the earliest steps taken as an autonomous institute, the MANN has sought to appear as a sensitive, informed actor within society, recommending itself not merely as a place of conservation but also as a shared space for debate and reflection on contemporaneity in the light of the masterly accomplishments of the past. The Museum's ultimate aim is, in fact, to stimulate civic awareness, fostering an understanding of our origins and an awareness of our common roots, in the belief that the "museum of the future" will have increasingly to discharge a specific "political" function. It will do this by proving to be a place where the preconditions are created for an understanding of all the mechanisms underlying modern historical processes, a place which stimulates the critical powers of its users, which features as a vital force in the surrounding area, supporting, conditioning and reinforcing the processes of urban, social and economic development.

In concrete terms, this approach has been the inspiration for creating new services, visitor experiences and novel ways of enjoying the Museum, in which the subject of accessibility has been addressed in all its ramifications (physical, economic, cognitive and digital), and in direct relation to the more general aim of reaching "the greatest possible number of types of public" by appealing to visitors of all ages, income brackets, educational level and social extraction. This work has been carried forward by relying on qualified personnel but mainly through cooperation with end-users to ensure their direct involvement right from the educational planning stage.

Planning in relation to past, present and future

Acting on these assumptions, the MANN has, first of all, implemented the activities conducted by its own Educational Services aimed at promoting sensory and cognitive accessibility for special publics, each year extending its network of collaborative projects with associations and rehabilitation institutes, including – to cite the more long-established partnerships – l'Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e Ipovedenti di Napoli (Italian Union for the Blind and Visually-Impaired of Naples), ENS (National Institute for the Deaf), IPSIA "Paolo Colosimo" and the Rete Campania tra le Mani. This has enabled us to offer, over time, a broad, varied range of activities of which the most significant are tactile and LIS visits, tactile workshops for children and adults with visual impairments, intercultural workshops targeting the foreign communities, with a special emphasis on migrants and refugees; the

reception, guidance and accompaniment of mental health patients as well as minors from local reeducational institutions and multi-purpose day centres; special visits for prisoners and patients undergoing medical treatment for serious organic pathologies, assisted by the clinical psychology unit responsible for treating the psychological effects of the illness.

Starting in 2017, moreover, the Museum has launched a series of special projects of an experimental nature, focusing on accessibility and inclusion and implemented thanks also to specific funding such as the PON Culture e Development Fesr 2014-2020. It would be impossible to give a full account here of all the initiatives enacted, but a few examples can be listed according to their area of impact.

On the subject of interculturality, for example, mention can be made of the 2017 project “Through Others’ Eyes” (“Attraverso gli occhi degli altri”), concerned with producing teaching materials and aids for visitors of Chinese culture. Thanks to the involvement of Chinese students from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples, workshops were organized, fact sheets were drawn up for visitors from a Chinese cultural background, and meetings were held with Chinese children with a view to producing a booklet to be given to all the child visitors. The 2018 project “Ancient Present” (“Antico Presente”) also targeted a foreign public and involved producing five “emotional” videos focusing on five exhibits on permanent display. Since the main aim was to attract foreign tourists potentially interested in visiting the museum, the videos were produced in five different languages: English, French, German, Spanish and Italian.

In the area of cognitive and sensory disabilities, the MANN has put in place a wide-ranging programme of activities called “The Accessible Museum”, concerned specifically with applied technologies in the cultural heritage field. In 2019, the project “The Museum To Hand” (“Il museo a portata di mano”) involved the scanning and printing of 3D replicas, in special resins, of about forty items representative of the main permanent collections. The replicas were initially displayed in a special room but in future they will be placed near the original artifacts and serve as a further aid in the preparation of tactile tours. A different venture got under way in 2021. Once the first stage of the restoration of the Alexander Mosaic had been completed, “The Great Mosaic” project entailed developing a multimedia and multi-channel 3D didactic system, with “augmented” contents and enhanced by videomapping. The purpose was not only to increase the visibility and

intelligibility of the narrative phenomena, but to encourage the inclusion of deaf people by means of a narrative with subtitles tailored specifically to the needs of deaf visitors.

New languages, technology, multisensoriality

The MANN also signed up to the research project “AIVES - Arte e Innovazione Visioni Emozioni Sensazioni” (“AIVES – Art and Innovation Visions Emotions Sensations”), aimed at creating a system that would enable artworks and the archeological and archival heritage to be enjoyed by all potential visitors to museums, galleries and libraries - whether able-bodied or with disabilities –through the transmission of stimuli inducing sensations and emotions in the user that would have the effect of “communicating” the art. As regards the MANN specifically, in 2019 a multisensory low relief was created of the famous fresco of “Europa and the Bull” from Pompeii. Still within the context of the AIVES project, the Museum organized the study day, “Multisensoriality and Technology for Accessibility and Inclusion: Comparing Experiences”, held on 28 September 2022 which allowed several of the most important cultural institutions of southern Italy to compare notes and pool their experience of issues relating to accessibility and inclusion.

Among the most recent experiments in the field of sensory accessibility, mention must be made of the E.LIS.A. project, promoted by the Campania Region and involving the creation of inclusive multimedia tours of the artistic and cultural heritage of Campania, accessible to the deaf. As a partner, the MANN took an active part in devising a video-guide in LIS and IS. It was presented on 22 December 2022 and focuses on the history of the Museum and its principal collections, introduced through a description of twenty-seven artworks.

In recent years, moreover, the MANN has engaged fully with the issue of accessibility when setting up and restyling its permanent exhibition sections. In particular, in the case of the reopening of the Magna Graecia section in 2019, the preparation of ad hoc measures to facilitate access for the disabled was dealt with during the same planning stage as the design of the exhibition layout, thus enabling the requirements of an inclusive itinerary featuring tactile aids to be accommodated harmoniously within the framework of the architectural and graphic decisions adopted. Such an approach is also beginning to be systematically applied to temporary exhibitions, as was the case with “Assyrians in the Shadow of Vesuvius” (2019), “Gladiators” (March 2021 – April 2022) and, most recently,

“Byzantium: a Millennial Empire from Dawn to Waning” scheduled to open on 21 December 2022.

In the context of the new languages intended to involve an ever larger public, the MANN has also availed itself of the Naples University “Federico II” project, “Obvia for the MANN – Out of Boundaries Viral Art Dissemination” – a viral dissemination of art beyond the physical barriers of the museum, told through contaminations, art production, and the synaesthesia that can attract different publics and involve them through emotion. The means being used in this initial phase include: cartoons suitable for different target audiences (adult, young adult, kids), art videos, video guides to works in the Museum, comics, literary productions, drawing exhibitions, works that reinterpret the Museum’s artworks from a technological viewpoint, and handcrafted reproductions of ancient artifacts.

Secondly, the project aims to set up multiple stable networks within the area, for the dual purpose of both raising the Museum’s profile – through links with infrastructures in the transport sector (airports, railway networks, undergrounds), with Factory MAD Entertainment, with the Union of Independent Cinemas, with cultural sites dealing with festivals and events of national importance, and with institutions and research bodies – and the purpose of promoting the social and cultural development of the region through synergies with scientific and creative academies, conservatoires, theatres of the calibre of San Carlo, Bellini and other ICC bodies. The ExtraMann network is also of considerable interest. This is a network of the MANN’s partners, based on regional, thematic and social criteria, and forged by figures who manage and promote cultural sites by implementing new management approaches, like those based on public-private open innovation initiatives.

Following on from artistic production and the forging of networks to promote the image of the Museum, the next important upgrade is the creation, under the auspices of the “OBVIA per il MANN” project, of a cultural, scientific, social and creative project centred on the Museum which acts as main partner in the task of promoting the growth and development of the region, supported by the University of Naples “Federico II” and by INVITALIA.

Finally, the new forms of language aimed at creating a digital community include two video games: “Father and Son” I and II, from 2018 and 2022.

Accessibility and inclusion are fields in which the MANN, like many other national and international cultural institutes, has done much, though much remains to be done. In this sense the new definition of “museum” adopted by the ICOM is at once a declaration of awareness and a springboard for the museum of the future. This can no longer see itself simply as a shrine to beauty but must strive above all to be a place of wellbeing in which everyone can feel at home because they are made welcome and provided with the wherewithal to gain an understanding of history - insights which in turn will enhance awareness of their individual and collective identity.

A sensational museum experience with geopolymers

Professor Germana Barone, University of Catania

The constant mission of all stakeholders involved in museum management is to make the best use of their collections – understood as Cultural Heritage - and ensure the greatest enjoyment from them. It is equally important, now more than ever, to make museum visits easily manageable, participatory and inclusive, devising measures to make the visit immersive and accessible to all types of public. For example, a museum which is inclusive as regards blind or visually impaired visitors must tailor visits to their tactile requirements. Since they are recognized as Cultural Heritage assets, the artifacts which make up museum collections - historical and artistic, but also scientific – are often protected by strict regulations which prevent them from being touched, moved, or even photographed. This makes it impossible for people with sensory deficits of a visual nature to partake of the enjoyment which a museum affords - the knowledge sharing, but also the emotions and sensations which a museum visit can kindle.

This communication gap can be bridged by using copies of works of art or of any object of cultural interest. However, in many cases the sensory experience remains partial because an accurate perception of the nature of the materials is lacking. The textural characteristic of different materials such as marble, stone, pottery, is obliterated by the use of “anonymous” materials for replicas, like plaster or the plastics which fail to render the unique tactile experience. Hence the need to use new materials which both make it possible and easy to create copies of the artifacts, and, at the same time, enable their surface characteristics to be faithfully reproduced. In the case of stone material it would be necessary to use a “liquid stone” which solidifies like a cement in moulds of any shape or size.

With this aim in mind, it has become increasingly important to make a rational choice of materials with which to make copies. In today’s world, the search is on for new materials which are environmentally sustainable and which foster the circular economy through the use of natural and/or industrial waste in order to implement the Energy Transition process promoted by EU policies. This scenario includes alkaline activated materials, more

commonly known as “geopolymers”, inorganic materials which resemble natural stone materials such as rocks, and artificial materials like mortars and ceramics.

The geopolymers are formed through a chemical process which involves mixing an aluminosilicate powder and an alkaline solution. Unlike traditional materials, which often require heat treatment with temperatures of up to 1350°C, these new products are made at room temperature, without the use of ovens, with the further advantage of reducing carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere. Moreover, natural waste or waste from industrial production processes can be used, significantly reducing the extraction of natural raw materials.

Depending on the field of application, it is possible to obtain materials and artifacts with different physical and mechanical properties and to vary colour and texture. In fact these are extremely versatile materials which can be adapted for use in high-tech or niche fields such as restoration, establishing themselves as valid alternatives to traditional materials while remaining compatible with them from both a technical and aesthetic viewpoint.

In recent years, thanks to our active involvement and management of the PNR project “Advanced Green Materials for Cultural Heritage”, we have not only succeeded in the research and development of alkaline-activated materials by using natural and industrial Sicilian waste, such as volcanic ash from Etna and ceramic waste, but in their successful application at pilot sites of considerable historical and artistic interest. Geopolymer mortars were tested and applied in the restoration of detached mosaic tesserae in the Cathedral of Monreale (PA) as well as in restoring the worn and damaged brickwork of the Catania Odéon. Geopolymer bricks were produced and used to build a prototype of a small wall in imitation of the original masonry of the Odéon, and a prototype of a lava stone capital was also made at the same site, again using polymers.

Judging from these experiences, and bearing in mind the enormous potential of such materials, it is not difficult to imagine their being used in more specific contexts requiring the reproduction of museum artifacts which can be touched and handled. As we mentioned, at present the materials commonly used for this purpose are polymers and resins which, by their very nature, cannot reproduce the textures of the original material.

This difficulty can easily be overcome by the use of alkaline-activated materials. By juggling with the chemical components and with the moulding process, it is possible to obtain objects with different shapes and surfaces – smooth, rough, porous, with added fibres and tangible aggregates. Furthermore, the versatility of these materials allows us to envisage making museum reproductions with the same raw material as the originals, thus enhancing the emotional involvement of the user. A propos of which, it is possible to make faithful reproductions of ceramic artifacts of archeological interest, exhibited in museums, by using, for instance, ceramic waste from the manufacturing sector; or epigraphs and marble statues by using natural precursors such as metakaolin or pumices. In addition, where necessary, the colour can be modified by using mixes containing several precursors so as to reproduce, for example, veined polychrome marble.

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