

Globalisation, Universal Museums and the Internet

by Klaus Muller

In 2002 eighteen museums declared themselves 'Universal' and opened the door to debate on the cultural and political status of all museums. In a bid to find out more we have asked Museum Consultant, Klaus Muller, some questions about this network of like-minded museums, the development of internationally accessible exhibitions available on the internet and the effects of global concerns on local museums.

How do you view the 2002 declaration by eighteen museums that they are universal and serve “the people of every nation”?

The notion of a global culture is not a new one. Born from the cabinets of curiosity of the 17th and 18th centuries, museums always have collected, with and without permission of the owners, spectacular and exotic objects and specimens from all over the world. While collecting has become more scientifically rigorous over the centuries, the problem of original and rightful ownership of artifacts has come under greater public scrutiny.

The 2002 declaration of eighteen museums to be 'universal museums' did not help much with this complex, yet necessary discussion. The bold statement that they would not return artifacts seized during colonial rule or during similar earlier periods of history was fuelled by the 'Parthenon Dilemma' as one could call the long running dispute between England and Greece over the legal and moral right to the so-called 'Elgin Marbles'. The declaration seemed to lack the awareness that such questions can only be solved in an open and long-term debate, not a one-time statement.

The eighteen museums may indeed have a legal argument to make about their right to hold and display artifacts acquired in previous centuries under very different laws and standards. But they still will have to negotiate with ethnic groups and nation-states asserting their right to objects that reflect their cultural heritage. As the objects indeed belong to a global audience, this also presents a chance to reiterate holdings and get a variety of perspectives.

In your introduction to the *Curator: The Museum Journal* issue on museums and globalisation you noted that the de-localising characteristic of global economics has not altered the local or community role of museums. What are the effects of globalisation on museums that you have observed and do you think it has homogenised their appearance and attitude to audiences?

Globalisation is effecting museums everywhere, not just through the rise of tourism worldwide, but also growing migrations patterns. Urban centres have become transnational areas that are no longer defined solely by their nations, but by the rich, ever changing mix of permanent and temporary residents with widely diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Globalisation, it seems, is happening right in our own neighbourhoods. In that sense, museums need to reconsider their immediate local and regional environment as future audiences will not share the same

cultural background, language, religion or curiosity. A diversification of the board, leadership and staff might help to address this necessary reorientation. However, a museum can't be everything for everyone, but it makes choices—and rightly so. It represents specific cultural and ethical values. A globalised local and regional environment will force museums to communicate these choices more forcefully. Such communication plays and will continue to play an important role in the development of the social cohesion that museums contribute to in their local environment.

A number of major international museums such as the Guggenheim, the Hermitage, and the Centre Pompidou have expanded with additional sites outside of their own countries. What are your views and observations on this recent trend?

Only the Guggenheim attempted to establish itself as a worldwide operating museum chain, opening up venues for its collection across and outside the United States. But after its closures in Las Vegas and partially, New York, many saw the 'McGuggenheim', ambition as a misunderstood adaptation of the corporate dot.com model of global expansion. As *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman observed: “Bigger is not better; better is better”. At least for the moment, the brand of the Guggenheim seems to be damaged by its overreach.

Only a few museums (Guggenheim, Louvre, Tate, Hermitage) will be able to use their brand name to expand into other venues and countries. The costs are considerable and over-extension might damage the brand of the 'mother' institution. They might draw on local resources necessary to uphold local and less famous museums, but they also might bring expertise and different cultural practice that refreshes the local cultural field and thus leads to better museum practices generally. It is an interesting development, but not one that will define how museums operate in the 21st century.

You have developed several online exhibitions that use the web to extend visitor access to collections. Do you regard this use of the internet as a response to globalisation?

An increasing number of our global visitors today do not arrive on our doorstep, but access collections through museum websites. New technologies facilitate the transmission of culture, transcending barriers of geography, ethnicity, and potentially, social status and income. The Web has created a borderless society.

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Nominations for the MA (Vic) Committee



The Museums Australia (Victoria) Branch is seeking nominations for the Branch Committee for the 2006-2008 Committee term. The Committee Secretary, Amy Barrett-Lennard, has put out the Call for Nominations with this issue of *inSITE*. The Museums Australia By-Laws advise that the Branch Committee must comprise of a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer along with, no less than three and no more than six, Ordinary Committee Members. The Museums Australia By-Laws advise that no person shall:

- be a member of the Committee for more than eight consecutive years
- hold the same office on the Committee for more than two elected terms
- hold more than one office on the Committee at any one time

The current Branch Committee of the four Officers and five Ordinary Members are listed on *inSITE*'s back page. Current Branch Committee members are all eligible for another term on the Committee. As some Committee members may choose to stand down, and as there are

currently five rather than the maximum of six Ordinary Members, nominations for new members are welcomed. The Branch Committee meets at the Melbourne Museum every two months for about two hours to discuss and review the general business of MA (Vic) and to bring ideas and information to the attention of the Branch. The Committee plays a vital role in the progress of the organisation and the development of its future. Its members need to be involved in the sector and able to contribute, challenging, informed and innovative perspectives to the group. In addition to attending meetings, Committee members participate in MA (Vic) functions and advocate its activities and objectives to the wider sector.

If you would like to know more about the Branch Committee you can call me on 03 8341 7344 or visit our website at: www.mavic.asn.au. There is a nomination form enclosed in this issue of *inSITE*.

Erica Sanders is the Executive Director of Museums Australia (Victoria). You can email her on exec@mavic.asn.au or call 03 8341 7344.

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The digital transformation of museums is challenging traditional ideas about what museums are about. Digital objects, online visitors, and virtual communication are redefining the museum, both online and onsite. From a Web perspective, museums no longer are local physical buildings, but global virtual spaces. Museums as any other corporate business or cultural institution need to follow this development and carry their mission to the web. For museums, the Web is a great opportunity to reach out to larger audiences, to maintain their cultural authority and to make their collections and exhibitions accessible to a larger audience.

What do you think are some good examples of networks that are operating in an international context?

CHIN (Canadian Heritage Information Network) and CAN (Collections Australia Network) are leading the

museum field internationally in regard to the extension of museums to the web. The Best of the Web competition give an update on the fast developments of museums and the Web (www.archimuse.com). H-Net (www.h-net.org) is a Michigan-based interdisciplinary organisation of scholars and an essential source of information on museum developments worldwide. I use H-Museum, (www.h-net.org/~museum) its museum studies network, to keep in touch.

Dr Klaus Muller is the Director of the Kmlink Museum Consultancy and can be contacted via his website at: www.kmlink.net. Based in Amsterdam, his consultancy advises museums, film and online exhibition projects and provides curatorial and acquisition services as well as lectures, seminars and training.

	<h2>RETI 2006 Deadline</h2> <h3>Thursday 13 April</h3>	<p>The Regional Exhibition Touring Initiative (RETI) supports museum sector touring activity in Victoria. For more information call 03 8341 7344 or visit: www.mavic.asn.au/reti</p>
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