

Activity Report of ICOM-Europe 2005-2006

Is there a unique European way to do museum work? This question stood at the beginning of my chairmanship of ICOM-Europe, when I took over from Dr. Hans-Martin Hinz in June 2005. I know this is a difficult question, but I wanted to open a debate about this question, because I think we need to know why we are working for museums in Europe. We need to know how our daily efforts are linked to the big questions of European identity and its development. And we need to know, what challenges lie ahead.

I have the vision of a new Europe, that I imagine like a gate. This gate is being supported by two pillars, that reflect basic elements of the European heritage. The first pillar has its fundament in the tradition of Socrates' philosophy according to which we are not born free, but only reach freedom through dialogue and engagement. This incorporates the principle of mutuality as the basis on which identities are formed. Only through the other, in debate and quarrel, we will know who we are. And it means, that we should thrive to approach each other as equal. I believe culture serves as the best field for this, because economic, political or social equality is much more difficult to achieve. Only in culture and the arts, especially in museums throughout Europe, we have the chance to approach each other on even grounds.

The second pillar has its fundament in the Greek word *ethos*, defined as the habit of regular stay or shelter. It means to emphasize the principle of hospitality towards the stranger, in the way European cities in the Middle Ages gave shelter for refugees and those in need of sanctuary. It means to consider migration as an essential part of Europe's cultural identity. Hospitality can only be offered for a limited amount of time as Kant pointed out in his work "Der ewige Frieden" and an old Chinese proverb says, that he who comes through the door as a stranger should not forget to greet. The basis for understanding and a culture of democracy is to approach the stranger with empathy and respect. Integration, as Kofi Annan said, is a two-way street.

The third element of the gate is its connecting roof or top. I believe, that it should be dedicated to the individuality of each human being. It means to respect the differences in habit, gender, longings and behaviour of each individual and certainly to foster his infinite potential for creativity. To allow difference is a cultural good, that has to be fought for. None of this comes by itself. Respect for the individual and his creative potential is something we still have to care more about, because the dark shadows of the European 20th century, that have so much oppressed individuality, are still very long.

These three elements compose what I call “The Gate of Europe” and create the entrance to all European museums. These basic ideas were considered in the preamble of the mission statement of ICOM-Europe, that was passed at its Sixth Board Meeting in Paris and will be submitted to the Task Force Regional Organizations. They were reflected in the activities of ICOM-Europe in the term 2005-2006.

Last year in August I had the pleasure of opening the “Baltic Summerschool of Museology ” as its patron. On its invitation card you could see a wonderful arrangement of rocks from the Baltic Sea . Each rock reflects an individual story, each rock is special, different from the next. To me it symbolized the third element of “The Gate of Europe”: the importance of individuality, showing us, that we should care for every single object, not classify it as one of a kind, but to see and record its specific features, as well as its meaning for the person we received it from. ICOM-Europe will continue to be patron of the “Baltic Summerschool of Museology”, because I believe, that its high standard contributes excellently to the European landscape of museums. ICOM-Europe has contributed to several activities, that will the

The conference “Shifting Borders – New Identities” by ICOM-Europe, that took place from September 17, to September 25, 2005 has jointly been organized by ICOM-Lithuania, ICOM-Belorus and ICOM-Ukraine with the support of ICOM-Germany. It focused on countries in a phase of transition and discussed the shifting of national identities reflecting the European unification. It showed the remarkable efforts of our colleagues in these countries to preserve monuments and collections of European importance. Connected to the debate about migration as a vital part of European identity the aspect of forced migration in Eastern Europe was touched. The outstanding engagement of the president of ICOM-Belorus, Alexander Kalbaska, for this conference demonstrated the strong will to foster and strive for democracy and dialogue despite all forms of restriction imposed by the now ruling government.

At the conference for “Sustainable Heritage in Economics, Ecology and Culture”, chaired by Amareswar Galla, from January 12, to January 15, 2006 in Hanoi, Vietnam, I represented ICOM-Europe with a presentation about “The New Face of Europe in its Museums”. You will see it on our webpage very soon. The interdisciplinary dialogue on the issue of sustainable heritage in the Decade of Sustainability implied by the United Nations was of great importance for all conferences to follow in Europe in the next years.

“Building bridges through Exhibitions” was a conference organized jointly by ICOM-Europe and ICOM-Arab in Berlin and Oldenburg from March 22, to March 25, 2006. It succeeded in building up confidence in a phase of difficult relationships between Europe and the Arabian countries. The results were very substantial. The exhibition “Saladin and the Crusaders”, that three German archeological museums have organized about the famous Arabian emperor, is bound to travel to Damascus and Kairo. This will for the first time allow European interpretations of Arabian history to be discussed broadly in at least two of its countries. Besides that an exhibition workshop is planned in Tunis for 2008 and forthcoming in 2008 is also a conference in Granada, Spain. The architectural relics of the “first enlightenment in Europe” in Granada and Sevilla during the time of the califat in Spain will be an excellent setting to discuss how the Arabian and European roots of modernity, as well as cultural diversity and all aspects of migration until our present days are reflected in Europe’s museums.

Just last week the preparations for the ICOM-Europe conference and museum tour “Museums for Peace and Cultural Diversity” from September 16, to September 20, 2006 in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Banja Luka, Sarajevo and Dubrovnik have reached its final phase. My visit to Zagreb and Dubrovnik gave me a chance to get a first hand impression of the situation of museums in the region. I am convinced, that we can contribute to cross-border exchange and strengthen the relationships between European museums with these activities. ICOM-members are very welcome to register for this conference within the next weeks in the office of ICOM-Europe in Berlin. (chair@icom-europe.org)

ICOM-Europe is on its way to be a forum for debate about the role of Europe’s museums in a rapidly changing world and will provide – as expressed in its mission statement - a forum for the exchange of information, activities, co-operation and good practice between the National Committees of the region and the Regional Organisations in order to bring ICOM members together on a cross-border basis. In order to accomplish this ICOM-Europe has to rely on the active engagement of the ICOM-members and the National Committees in Europe to support our work. In order to strengthen the insufficient financial basis of ICOM-Europe the Board has asked the Chairman to work out an agenda for the term 2007 – 2010. Together with the Mission statement this will be the basis on which ICOM-Europe will request subsidies by ICOM in a formal application, that will be submitted to the Executive Council together with the other Regional Organisations in due time. I would like to call on all National Committees as well to consider supporting the projects of ICOM-Europe.

Finally I would like to thank the members of my Board and especially ICOM-Germany , namely Dr. York Langenstein, Johanna Westphal and Katja Roßocha for their support of ICOM-Europe and thank you, the Advisory Board, for your attention.

Udo Goesswald

Chair

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