

Sharing collections – exchanging views

by **Brian Durrans**

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The theme of the ICOM General Conference in Seoul, in October 2004, was “Museums and Intangible Heritage” – but the tangible object, the irreducible core of what museums are about, was never far from view. Sharing the experience of museum objects with the widest possible public, now and in the future, is often proclaimed as an objective but less often worked for in a practical, collaborative and systematic way. This becomes possible, even essential, when certain collections are given a more immediate role in helping secure a better world – or at least a world that will continue to value museums for the knowledge they contain and develop. Such a future is not yet guaranteed, but neither are museums or the kinds of knowledge they stand for accepted everywhere even today. So there is much to work for.

> Since 2001, eight projects involving practical collaboration in the sharing of museum collections have been moving forward within ASEMUS, the Asia-Europe Network of Museums. ASEMUS brings together specialists from within the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) group of nations, by means of the generous and continuing support of ASEF (Asia-Europe Foundation, the executive arm of ASEM).

> Prominent among these projects is a travelling exhibition, “Self and Other: Portraits from Asia and Europe”, developed by colleagues from 10 Asian countries, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Rep. of Korea, Singapore and China and 8 European countries, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Sweden, Greece, Ireland and Spain.

> This exhibition project originated in Leiden in April 2002 and has since been revised and elaborated at a series of workshops in Shanghai, London, Singapore, Lisbon and Osaka. This will be an exhibition of ways in which, through history and up to the present, Asians and Europeans have imagined and represented each other. Portraiture raises questions of the deepest and most pressing relevance to everyone. How ‘like’ someone does their ‘likeness’ have to be? How does a pictorial or sculpted portrait compare with a written one – which is more complete, accurate or flattering to its human subject? Where does unadorned realism shade into caricature? Is a portrait intended to capture personality a better portrait or work of art than one which seeks to record the subject’s social status? Indeed, can personality and status – or social and individual roles – be so neatly polarised in this way? Such questions arise more easily when people get to know each other better and begin to question about each other and about themselves.

> Selected to provoke such rethinking will be 200 outstanding historical and contemporary portraits of Asians and Europeans in as many different, and mixed, media as possible, roughly half each from Asian and European collections, and including newer installations and commissioned works. The show will travel to 6-8 venues in both continents between 2006 and 2008, and in each venue will occupy around 1,000 m² of gallery space. A visual feast for the broadest possible public, and food for thought to those wishing to explore the theme further, it will include familiar faces, some masterpieces, and hidden treasures never before seen in public or outside their institutions or countries of origin.

> What, then, does an exhibition of portraits have to do with making a better world? The answer is simple. Portraits refer in distinctive ways to common yet evolving human concerns about the place and role of the individual in society; and images of other people have excellent potential, if imaginatively promoted, to attract visitors to museums both in Europe and in Asia. The exhibition will show how the mutual gaze of Asia and Europe has historically progressed from near-total misunderstanding, through partial internalising of the other’s point of view, to a growing recognition of shared

identities and responsibility for the future. Asian and European visitors should enjoy the exhibition, catalogue and Web site, and reflect on the images they see. If, as planned, venues take initiatives to develop this experience further, then we will have set, together, a wonderful example of bringing collections together and peoples together. Significant numbers of Asians and Europeans will have begun to see each other and themselves more clearly, and jettisoned a few unhelpful or dangerous stereotypes along the way.

> The next steps for the travelling exhibition project are to finalise the content and venues – and to raise nearly £1m to make it all happen

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SAMP twinship

by **Paul Msemwa**

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The history of the Swedish African Museum Network (SAMP) goes back to 1989, when Alpha Konaré challenged the museum community to establish North-South collaboration. This brief presentation describes the processes, difficulties and advantages in establishing twinships.

> The principle that governs museums in the SAMP network is the belief that it is possible to share ideas and experiences across cultures by working together in mutually beneficial endeavours. Museums express interest in joining the network by writing to the SAMP Secretariat, sending information material and explaining what their museum can offer the network. The Secretariat studies the museum profiles and tries to match them with a Swedish Museum. Then the representatives of potential twin museums attend a SAMP meeting. This provides an opportunity to get to know the nature of the museum, its working methods and its areas of interest at institutional level. It is followed by staff exchanges in order to fully understand the working systems and organisational structures. Once the parties are satisfied, a memorandum of understanding is signed, committing each museum to remain in the SAMP network for at least five years.

> The next step is for the twin museums to sit together, brainstorm and come up with areas of common interest to work on. Our own institution (the National Museum and House of Culture, Dar es Salaam) has been involved in a number of long-term development activities within the framework of the SAMP Consolidation and Institutionalisation Programme, including joint research, exchange of exhibitions and artists and organising conferences. Funding for these activities has been raised through the SAMP Secretariat and contributions from the two museums.

> A successful twinship like the Village Museum (Tanzania) and Skansen (Sweden), depends to a large extent on a few committed individuals in both institutions and on institutional support. Even more importantly it depends on openness between individuals. The longer individuals interact and work together the stronger the network. Letters and e-mails alone do not build trust; informal and formal meetings are essential. We are

all influenced by our historical backgrounds and cultures. We create our own perception and image of others on the basis of external manifestations but what lies underneath these assumptions takes much longer to fathom.

> The main advantages derived from SAMP have included sharing experiences and professional knowledge and learning from the communities with which we have interacted. The major lesson we have learnt is the realisation that people leading simple rural lives are basically alike, whether they are in Sweden or Tanzania. We have also discovered that most of our museums operate under bureaucratic systems, both in Europe and in Africa.

> One of the difficulties SAMP has experienced is staff turnover. This is common to both European and African Museums and poses a major challenge to twinships, especially if they are built around individuals and not institutions. This is the essence of the institutionalisation of SAMP activities and helps overcome bureaucratic tendencies. Every

person in the institution is aware and supportive of SAMP.

> Communication through letters and e-mails is still a major problem, especially in African Museums, despite each museum having Internet facilities. Most Africans feel that written communication, as opposed to verbal communication, is too committal. The heavy bureaucracy in African Museums also means that no one is prepared to be called to account when things go wrong. Improving communications between museums

is an ongoing challenge for SAMP in its determination to play a true role in bridging cultures. It is worth noting that trust between professionals actually takes much longer than we would like to believe.

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Pathways to Integration

by **Luiz Antônio Bolcato Custódio**

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The theme "Museums Bridging Cultures", allows us to put forward some ideas to show the opportunities and relevance of the topic in relation to our present cultural context. Although it derives its inspiration from a real-life bridge it also evokes connections, barriers and issues relating to frontiers, as well as processes that occur among social groups, peoples and cultures. These are ideas that can directly involve the activities of museums.

> We are currently witnessing the results of simultaneous developments, some of them opposed to each other and apparently irreconcilable: on the one hand the formation of large blocs or communities of countries, and on the other the existence of conflicts arising from internal divisions within the same country. We are also witnessing efforts to combat segregation and prejudice in many countries. These aim to strengthen common identities, cultural or commercial. In some cases, historical relationships are being used to justify both unions and separations, integration and the creation of barriers. In other cases, these new

situations exist because of increased communications. All, however, stem from cultural processes.

> We must seek to understand the role of museums here. Museums are – or should be – mirrors of society, its development and culture, both past and present. And what other social institution, if not museums, can properly fulfil this reflective role, based on documentary testimony mediating between groups and cultures? They can deal with local topics and approach broader questions by participating in communities which are becoming increasingly complex and diversified through increased interaction, developing relationships and diverse interests.

> An example of an institution that promotes this kind of integration is the Mexico City National Museum of Anthropology and History. It is probably the first museum to have involved the various levels of society in building the idea of a nation. It relates the representations of different contemporary communities to their native predecessors and to their own land, taking an integrative and participative point of view. The results are represented and periodically updated within the museum, which studies and documents them and becomes involved in the various social processes.

> In South America another example of the theme, chosen for its historical importance in promoting the integration of a group of countries which have formed a singled context in the past, is that of the Guarani Jesuit Missions. Today, since the formation of Mercosul⁽¹⁾, we are trying to reconnect old links, reduce differences and decrease the divergences arising from past conflicts. In this process the museums have also had an integrating role, displaying historical evidences and considerations and contributing to the economic development of the region through cultural tourism.

> I was born in the Pampa, on the frontier between the south of Brazil and the north of Uruguay – a frontier that has always been open – and to me the idea of integration as one of the basic needs in human relationships is very dear: the direct contact, the mixing of languages, traditions and knowledge and old histories.

> And as they approach topics involving individuality, diversity, difference and interpretation museums become active institutions. They come to be recognised as socially necessary and as participants in the history of their communities and of the dreams, desires and problems of those societies. They become institutions for promoting dialogue which face up to the tensions and contradictions inherent in social processes.

> These are the ideas behind the very existence of museums. They also form one of the main functions of ICOM, as a representative organisation promoting integration, interchange and links – which build bridges – between professionals, communities, countries and their cultures.

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⁽¹⁾ A group of countries composed of Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay, for the purposes of greater economic and cultural integration.