

# Museums and Globalisation

## Globalisation, Culture and Museums

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> Globalisation is often conceived as a tidal wave, a catastrophe that obliterates all in its path: nations, economies, communities, cultures. It's huge and immensely powerful - as uncontrollable as a force of nature. Everywhere it affects ordinary individuals as well as large political and economic structures. It is inescapable. However, the tidal wave metaphor does not give the whole picture; it describes the *shock* of globalisation, but not the *dynamic*.

> Firstly, cultural globalisation is not new. Cultural contact, clash and change have always accompanied the economic contacts of trade and the political contacts of conquest. And although culture is always place-bound, it is never static. Cultural diffusion occurs throughout history, creating new cultural forms, often resisted as impure and dangerous. But aspects of hybrid change inevitably become adopted into mainstream culture. There never was and never can be a single pure stream of local, national or ethnic culture, other than a variant which receives the imprimatur of political correctness - for a time...

Yet change was once so slow that culture could seem eternal, before sea travel and European trade and imperialism induced unprecedented

cultural (and other) changes in Africa, America, Asia and Oceania.

Today, however, technological developments enable cultural contact at such an individual level that it pervades daily life as never before. Globalisation is much more evident and much more personal than ever it was in the past. At present, it looks very much as though American culture is overtaking all else - this is the "Coca-Colonisation" scenario. American films, music and taste ride on TV and computer technology, reproducing American ideologies throughout the world.

> That may be true - but it's not the whole story: anthropologists observe that adoption of Western or American cultural influences is nowhere total. Elements of Western culture are taken up, yet they receive a local twist. Rock music acquires ethnic expressions; Hollywood spawns Bollywood; TV audiences watch local soaps in between the syndicated comedies. Traditionalists see such incursions as the corruption of authentic cultural expression. But with different eyes, we can see that hybrid forms contain their own logic and integrity.

> Should we reject or welcome the bastard products of cross-cultural contact? The answer to this question defines a personal politico-moral position. Today, we make such judgements in relation to a whole world of issues - the environment, human rights, international museology and so forth. Individuals themselves take on a global consciousness.

> To participate in globalising culture is to plunge into the tension

between what sociologist Roland Robertson calls "cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation"<sup>[1]</sup>. The pressure of homogenisation is resisted with thousands of local expressions of heterogenising difference, opening up new perspectives for museums in the age of globalisation.

> Museums will continue to have a role as the repositories of traditional, even extinct, cultures. Specimens should always be preserved, as a record of and a tribute to the past. At the same time, museums must avoid both antiquarianism and nostalgia. This means we must engage with original owners or their descendants to understand the context of cultures now

embedded in museum collections. It might mean repatriating some material. But experience already shows that the relationships formed between museums and the subjects of their collections can produce new kinds of knowledge. Museums should now also document and collect the hybrid forms emerging in their domains, drawing on specialist museological expertise, unconstrained by conventional canons. Such collections of past and present will become, in cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai's

description, a "warehouse of cultural scenarios"<sup>[2]</sup>. Museum collections constitute a resource for human creativity, and we should facilitate their use by our communities.

> And of course museums must interpret both old and new cultures, informed by the perspective of tolerance. Pride in the achievements of one's own culture, together with a curiosity and respect for other cultures, defines museums' way ahead.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Robertson, Roland, 'Social Theory, Cultural Relativity and the Problem of Globality' in A.D. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, Houndmills, Macmillan, 1991, p.73.

<sup>[2]</sup> Appadurai, A., 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global cultural Economy', *Public Culture*, 2/2, 1990, p.4.

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**A**t its meeting in June 2001, the Advisory Committee decided on the theme for International Museum Day 2002. "Museums and Globalisation" was retained, a topic which mobilises museums all over the world, whatever their size or discipline. In what follows, you will find different facets of the theme and a bibliography