

Editorial: The legacy of migrants

The present issue of *MUSEUM International* is mainly intended to review the objectives, phases and components in the planning of the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration due to open in Paris in June 2007. Secondly, it fits the French project in an international context by comparing it with a selection of articles that present the work of immigration and emigration museums around the world. In both cases, we will explore and probe the historical legacy left by migrants, the subject in this issue of our Journal.

Our survey begins with an observation and a simple question: does the plethora of museum projects on migration reflect an attempt on the part of the public authorities to bypass the issue under the guise of culture and so ignore it politically, or is it an encouraging sign that the missions of museums are being reviewed to include social sciences and history? The articles perused would refute the first assumption that these projects were conceived «for the wrong reason but with the right alibi». The diversity and complexity of projects implemented by migration museums, the variety of disciplines and competences harnessed by the National Centre for the History of Immigration in Paris indicate, on the contrary, a trend towards enhancing the civic role of museums. This trend is the main reason for the interest in and role assigned to the French project in UNESCO's international Journal.

The declared political and social aim of research projects on recording immigration in France is to shift from a divisive past to one that unites. The field of heritage has been mobilised for this purpose, following that of history and memory. The wish to delve into the facts and understand the consequences of migration is driven by the imperious need to form links and areas of cooperation between cultural groups in France. The replacing of the word "Musée" with "Cité" highlights the role of the cultural institution that is being created in today's social and political matrix. The purpose of the Cité museum is not just to showcase and narrate different forms of heritage in our contemporary society but also to address certain aspects that cause problems. By way of introduction to the articles on the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration, and at the expense of slightly infringing on editing practices, we

felt it appropriate to allow Luc Gruson, vice chairman of the CNHI to express his own thoughts on the subject:

"The opening of the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration¹, as with all national and international projects, poses several challenges. How can it acknowledge the role played by immigration in the history of France and the contributions that foreigners have made to the country, how can it reflect changing mindsets so as to shed light on what it means to be French in a world in which the issue of identity causes tension and denial? This is a symbolic and a long-term project. Who better than a cultural institution, more specifically a museum, could fulfil this mission?"

The legitimate role of immigration in the cultural sphere and, a fortiori, in a heritage context, raises sensitive questions that nonetheless hold out hope for the future. The specific function of the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration is to allow these questions to be pondered.

A national museum, therefore, but one with initially no collection of its own, but a museum that would collect all tangible and intangible records of the history of immigration in France over the last two centuries. This museum, original in both its theme and in the approach it proposes to conservation, is not just a museum: it is a national centre that features cultural events, a resources centre, an educational project as well as a network of partners.

Firstly, its programming of cultural events. The permanent exhibition entails selecting among the different facets of the theme. It is therefore important to show through varied temporary exhibitions that the question of immigration is not impervious but that it embraces many issues facing today's societies and the world in general. Such programming must also give the opportunity to implement joint projects to encourage other institutions, not only cultural, public and private, to raise the themes presented by the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration. On the sidelines of these exhibitions, creators will be approached to question our contemporary world and to propose an approach sensitive to these issues: the centre will house, in the true sense of the term, artists in residence, small-scale or off-site shows, itinerant events and workshops so that the centre becomes a living museum. Of course, we will have to adapt to the monument which imposes its own message. We will have to deconstruct, encapsulate, conduct a dialogue and punctuate to maintain the momentum of a Cité, in addition to the other research and exhibiting functions of a museum.

As a result, the Cité nationale's programme is not only a challenge because of the themes it raises but also because it shifts the institutional borders: it is not really an institution with a social mission, nor is it an educational or research institution, even less an arts centre. However, it must be something of all these things at once. It must simultaneously shake off preconceptions and establish social links while prompting a reappraisal of the relationship between scientific knowledge and artistic creation. Finally, the institution aims to involve civil society through its network. This is perhaps the major challenge: create a heritage institution that takes into account social needs and is not merely the result of a cultural offering.

If the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration can meet these objectives, it will become a place of confrontation, in the noble meaning of the term, between self and others in a national community. At least, it will have the merit of refuting the premise that migration equals conflict."

The French project is a model in various regards. It has drawn on a historiographic revival and on the conviction held by a handful of historians that culture is a mode of civic action in its own right. It challenges its team of curators to establish the scientific basis, legitimacy and consistency for their collections. Finally, the assumed historical legacy of the chosen site (the former Palace of the Colonies) is confronted with the search for staged events, new ways to present them and attempts to establish new public practices that can endorse its civic role.

The future Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration in Paris and the international experience presented in the current issue of *MUSEUM International* reveal a number of features specific to migration museums. The first is the attention paid to migration processes, anthropologically and historically, and not to material and heritage results. The second lies in their ability to question and deconstruct often negative perceptions about the role of migrants in contemporary societies. The third and final particularity which emerges from the contributions of the authors is that these new institutions have a vibrancy driven by the need to constantly inter-act with society to draw on its cultural resources. In doing so, they can claim to be rooted in both history and in the living world.

The migration theme as raised by heritage institutions, i.e. by crossing over research disciplines and by not merely showcasing the historical heritage of migrants, seems to us one

of the most effective ways to explore the many areas of social development and to demonstrate the specific role of culture in the development process. Asserting the link between culture and sustainable development has been central to UNESCO's work for several decades. However, the operational programmes that have resulted mainly involve conservation projects and their potential impact on cultural tourism, eliciting criticism that heritage is being marketed. The work undertaken by migration museums is an opportunity to prove a set of theories whose merit until now seems to have lain in its ethical dimension. Reading the contributions to this issue of our journal suggests that the civic initiatives of migration museums should be an integral part of the cultural heritage safeguarding programmes of international organisations, so that heritage preservation truly becomes a key factor in sustainable development.

The present issue was prepared with scientific experts at the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration. Along with the present study based on heritage, UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences (www.unesco.org/migration), the International Organisation for Migration in Rome (www.old.iom.int) and the network of CNHI partners have together launched an international network of migration museums (www.migrationmuseums.org) to which this Journal is associated. The team of *MUSEUM International* has benefited from the combination of all these efforts in preparing this issue.

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Notes

ⁱ See the web site at www.histoire-immigration.fr