

## **Editorial**

### **Prospects for gender studies in cultural heritage**

Contrary to established beliefs, the decision to devote an issue of *MUSEUM International* to women and gender issues was a difficult one to take. A preferred discipline in Social Sciences, gender studies, through their transfer into the heritage field, should not entail a simplistic reification nor oscillate between some studies on women as heritage actors and others on women as heritage contributors. However, despite the risks of questioning notions that fall outside current heritage debates, *MUSEUM International*, as an international institutional publication, has a duty to review major strategies and programs that foster heritage and culture sharing policies under the United Nations system. The high priority granted to Goal n°3 of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>1</sup>, i.e. to promote gender equality and empower women, provide us with a clear framework for exploring gender studies in cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup>

The inclusion of art and culture in international development agendas offers a major opportunity to re-appraise the role that women play in contemporary societies and hence to fine-tune development policies. Above all, opening up development policies to culture is an opportunity to step up action to promote gender equality. This recurring theme runs throughout our present issue which seeks to bridge the gap between topics as different as women, heritage and gender equality. Our aim, albeit modest, seeks to clarify the objectives and to pin down the issues that concern us.

The three chapters in this edition of our Journal each propose a different and non-exhaustive approach to gender studies and their prospects in the cultural heritage field.

Chapter 1 reviews the various forms in which women participate in community life and draws on heritage categories that have been newly identified or re-assessed (oral traditions, crafts) or through the use of information and communication technologies in museums. Valentine Moghadam and Manilee Bagheritari analyze human rights as related to women in decisions on cultural heritage and explain why we need to be mindful of these rights when implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and in the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by UNESCO in 2003 and 2001 respectively. Against a backdrop of pooling different experience and challenges, Karen Offen and Elisabeth Cohen assess the importance of intangible heritage in making visible the ways women, as knowledge holders, can appropriate heritage. Finally, Fatima Sidiqi investigates how women can gain recognition for the roles they play by drawing a parallel between promoting the past and preserving this heritage.

Chapter 2 describes the different levels at which women are present in the heritage sector: from the deconstruction of perceptions and views of native women in the history of compiling collections, discussed by Olivia Robinson and Trish Barnard for Queensland Museum and State Library in Australia, and the description of the career and life of Hongnam Kim, general director of national museums in the Republic of Korea, to the analysis of relations between women and power in an Islamic and post-colonial cultural context. The articles in this chapter help to demonstrate that heritage preservation policies can only claim to be inclusive and comprehensive, and hence drive the development process, if they recognize and initially take into account the specific involvement and position of women at all these levels.

Chapter 3 reviews the experience of women in their commitment to creating museums in cultures and regions of the world (Latin America, South East Asia, Europe and North America). The primary objective of these women is to make visible what still remains invisible. Graciela Tejero Coni, Nguyen Thi Tuyet, Kari Sommerseth Jacobsen and Paula Goldman, among others, speak out to suggest that museums are not at all repositories of art works but a living space where objects assume meaning and are deployed in a wider cultural context and as part of a cultural capital. The aim of museums devoted to women is to harness heritage to control and manage this capital. That is why these museums are becoming the new battle-fields on which to fight for gender equality.

It should be stated in conclusion that the relationships between gender equality and heritage still suffer from a lack of visibility and understanding among new heritage policy makers. Despite this, the goalposts largely shifted and certain assumptions have been reappraised. Compared with the 1991 issue of *MUSEUM*, all the articles presented here reveal that we are in a transition phase. It is a fact that new heritage policies serve to promote gender equality and that gender equity, through heritage and culture, is today acknowledged as a development lever needs to be mentioned, but what is important is to recognise that these issues are complementary in international policies. That recognition, we feel, is a major asset to further our understanding of heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015, form a blueprint agreed by all countries and all major international development institutions. They have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest. A presentation on the MDGs may be consulted under the section "UNESCO and Reform of the UNO – Development Objectives " on the Strategic Planning site at the following site: [www.unesco.org/en/strategic-planning](http://www.unesco.org/en/strategic-planning)

<sup>2</sup> A first issue devoted to women and museums has been published in 1991: *Focus on Women*, *MUSEUM*, n° 171, Vol. XLIII, n° 3, 1991. It is available on the digital archives website of *MUSEUM International* at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/museum/search.html>