

International Museum Day 2004 “Museums and Intangible Heritage”

Intangible Heritage and Museums

by **Giovanni Pinna**

Chair, ICOM-Italy, Member of the ICOM Executive Council

> A UNESCO meeting held in March 2001 adopted the following provisional definition of intangible cultural heritage: “peoples’ learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and the creativity of humanity”.

> On the basis of this definition, we can identify at least three categories of intangible cultural heritage (although the limits between the categories are difficult to determine precisely):

> 1) The first category should include the expressions, embodied in physical form, of the culture or traditional ways of life of a certain community, for example, their religious rites, traditional economies, ways of life, folklore, etc. To this first category belong some of the UNESCO “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”, such as the Kunqu Opera, Sicilian Puppets, the Jemaa el-Fna Square of Marrakech. These expressions retain their value as long as they remain alive in the culture or economy of the community to which they belong.

> 2) In the second category, I would put all those individual or collective expressions which do not have a physical form: language, memory, oral traditions, songs and non-written traditional music, etc. Some of these have also been proclaimed “Masterpieces” by UNESCO, for example, the oral heritage of the Zapara people in Ecuador and Peru.

> Museums can play an important role in the conservation of these two categories of intangible cultural heritage through recordings and transcriptions, which transform the intangible cultural heritage into tangible heritage and preserve it as historical and cultural testimony. In these cases, however, the living cultural expressions preserved artificially from the outside become fossilised in space and time; they lose any point of contact with the community in which they originated, they cease to be passed down and hence cease to be heritage. This should lead us to reflect on the value of identifying and preserving “World Intangible Heritage”, as UNESCO seeks to do.

> 3) The third category of intangible heritage includes the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of the objects which constitute tangible heritage. Every object has two dimensions: its physical aspect, for example its shape and size, and its meaning, which derives from its history, from the interpretation it receives from others, from its capacity to link past and present, and so forth.

“Museums can play an important role in the conservation of intangible cultural heritage through recordings and transcriptions...

However, these living cultural expressions thus become fossilised in space and time; they lose any point of contact with the community in which they originated, they cease to be passed down and hence cease to be heritage.”

its shape and size, and its meaning, the interpretation it receives from others, from its capacity to link past and present, and so forth.

> Museums have a very important function with respect to this last category of intangible heritage, since museum processes such as the selection of objects for acquisition and conservation, the historical and scientific interpretations of an object, the mounting of exhibitions, etc., tend to create symbolic meanings for objects and to impart these to a wide audience. The museum creates a culture of its own through these processes and helps to fashion a body of knowledge and hence a cultural heritage.

> The effects of museums on the meaning of the objects are not, however, overpowering, because the symbolic meaning of an object also stems from the interpretation that each individual gives the object, based on the individual’s personal background, in the context of shared socio-cultural norms.

> Nevertheless, I believe there is a quality common to all the three categories and which makes intangible heritage very different from tangible heritage: every expression of intangible cultural heritage inevitably changes with time - take language, for example. That is to say that a fundamental quality of intangible cultural heritage is its vitality. Every action envisaged to stop change will produce dead objects which have nothing in common with the real and vital intangible heritage of both communities and individuals.

Contact: Giovanni Pinna
Chair, ICOM-Italy

Viale Cassiodoro 1, Milano 20145, Italy.

Tel. & Fax (+39) 02 480 143 52

Email icomit@iol.it

Although the concept of heritage has been dominated by its tangible embodiments, intangible heritage is no less vital an ingredient of every civilisation. The issue of what role the museum - principal custodian of tangible heritage - may play in the collection, conservation, presentation and interpretation of intangible heritage is addressed below, as are the challenges intangible heritage poses to the museum. These and other debates will be at the heart of International Museum Day 2004 and the ICOM General Conference in Seoul in 2004, both devoted to intangible heritage