



FRAMEWORK CONVENTION  
ON THE VALUE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE  
FOR SOCIETY

LA CONVENTION-CADRE  
SUR LA VALEUR DU PATRIMOINE CULTUREL  
POUR LA SOCIÉTÉ



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# Making Heritage Accessible: Museums, Communities and Participation

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*The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.*

"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits". This is how Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 reads.

It has been a long time since everyone's right to participate in all forms of cultural life has been stated in official, universally valid documents. However, if we look at recent literature and at some of the latest acts adopted by the European Union and the Council of Europe, the concepts of participation in the arts and culture and of access to heritage as a fundamental right of all people seem to have become more central now than ever. In particular, the idea has emerged that citizens should participate not only in cultural activities, but in the very management of culture and cultural heritage and that this should generate a number of benefits.

The conclusions drawn by the Council of the European Union on participatory governance of cultural heritage and the EU Commission Communication "Towards an integrated

approach to cultural heritage in Europe" - both issued in 2014 - identify cultural heritage as a strategic resource for a sustainable Europe, acknowledge its social dimension and underline the importance of activating synergies across different stakeholders to safeguard and valorise it. They also recognize the importance of transparent and participatory governance systems to be shared with the people to whom heritage ultimately belongs. Likewise, the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention) underlines the need to involve everyone in society in the process of defining and managing cultural heritage, describing a "heritage community" as consisting of "people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations".

Access to heritage as a fundamental right of all and the need to encourage a people-centred approach to cultural heritage are also listed among the objectives of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018. Cultural heritage organisations, and among them museums, defined as "non-profit, permanent institutions

in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM 2007), should therefore strive to be inclusive and accessible to all, accessibility being a pre-condition for participation.

But accessibility is a multifaceted concept which has many dimensions: physical, intellectual, financial, social, emotional, attitudinal and so on. Barriers preventing people from taking advantage of the cultural

services provided by museums can go from restricted opening times to high admission fees to the lack of clear signage to the non-availability of information in alternative formats (BSL, Braille, etc.). In all cases, museums should be aware of the circumstances that impede people’s participation and the full enjoyment of their collections and should make an effort to remove them, in order to promote equal access to all. There are many examples of how museums in Europe are trying to dismantle barriers and widen engagement and involvement of different audiences, in order to fulfil their mission of institutions in the service of society.

### **Transport**

Accessibility starts well before reaching the museum and getting to the venue can already represent a challenge for some potential visitors for practical or economic reasons. Older people who have never visited can see the trip itself as a barrier, school groups can have difficulties in affording the costs connected to reaching the venue.

So, it can be the museum itself to take care of the transport of specific groups, or, like in the case of Amsterdam, an organization funded by the city and the Ministry of Culture, which acts as an intermediary between schools and the cultural sector and facilitates transport between schools and cultural institutions by organising the Cultuurbus and Cultuurboat, a free service that brings elementary school children to museums, concerts and exhibitions.

### **Outreach**

And if people can’t go to the museum, then the museum goes to people. Outreach also falls under the concept of accessibility. There are numerous examples of it in Europe. In Glasgow, since 1990, the Open Museum Project (OM) has been operating to take collections out to those communities, which the museums were failing to reach, making connections between the objects and individuals and groups. The services offered by the Open Museum are:

- ♣ lending (objects, paintings, small exhibitions and handling or reminiscence kits)
- ♣ advisory (providing expertise to enable people to develop collections and exhibitions of their own)
- ♣ partnerships (community groups coming in to explore collections and use them in their own exhibitions).

Over the years, the OM has worked with some of the most excluded groups and communities in Glasgow: women's groups from the large social housing projects on the periphery of the city, users of mental health services, black community groups, refugees and asylum seekers, etc. and has proved to be an extraordinary resource for public engagement and community involvement.

In the Netherlands, the Zeeuws Museum is located in an area consisting of several islands, which poses transportation problems for school groups. As a consequence, the museum created ZeeuwsMuseum@School, a handling collection of objects which are sent out to schools each year, along with boxes of materials related to them (questions, booklets, etc.). The objects are lent for a period of three-four weeks and used to teach different subjects, share knowledge, memories and associations. Also in the Netherlands, the Van Abbe Museum has developed guided tours aided by robot and museum staff for people who cannot leave home due to physical disabilities. In order to be fully accessible and reach out to all audiences, many museums, like the Centre Pompidou for example, have created mobile units, which travel to different locations and put up modular pop up structures in order to bring national collections to the provinces.

### **Opening times**

Opening times should be scheduled to meet the needs of visitors and be rather flexible. Several museums in the Netherlands disregard the traditional closing day, usually Monday, during the school holidays, in order to allow children and their families to visit and attend special activities and workshops. A probably not too difficult to realize measure to make museums accessible to people with autism is that of opening the doors for them one hour before regular opening. These "early bird" sessions seem to be a rather common practice in UK museums and show a remarkable consideration of the characteristics and needs of a very specific segment of the population.

### **The Museum Environment**

Accessibility has in the first place a physical dimension. Many museums, especially those which opened in the 19th century, are housed in purpose built buildings which resemble a temple and can be intimidating for visitors. Those located in historic buildings can present physical barriers (flights of stairs, lack of ramps, etc.) which make them inaccessible for people with disabilities. Having to comply with recent legislation and wanting to widen access, many museums have tackled physical barriers and at the same time have tried to create a more comfortable, user friendly environment, in some cases with designated spaces for small children and families. Generally speaking, the ambience plays an important role in promoting understanding of the works, in raising the intellectual curiosity of the users and

comfortable, welcomed and orientated in museum spaces will enjoy their visit more and learn more as a result, so it is important to invest on the museum infrastructures by creating restful areas including benches, chairs, and other opportunities to take a breather. Clear and effective signposting, colour coding, pictograms, maps and other visual aids are also important to contribute to visitors' orientation. Physical and sensory accessibility is guaranteed by many museums through handling collections, replicas, etc. which add an additional dimension to the visit not only for visually impaired people, but also for the general public. Consideration of the different learning styles as reflected in the museum displays, is also a sign that the museum values its visitors and tries to address each one individually. A lot has been done in this area, embracing learning theories – especially Kolb's and others – to develop exhibitions based on the recognition of different learning styles and offering learning opportunities for different kinds of learners<sup>1</sup>.

### **Interpretation - Cognitive Accessibility**

Choosing an object, whether exceptional or ordinary, to be part of a museum collection and displaying it in the museum galleries is a deliberate action which gives it a special status and the reasons for the choice itself can become part of a narrative which throws light on the history of the collection and the meaning of the artefact itself. The first interpreting act in a museum is that of writing a caption which gives information about the object, the subject represented, the materials used and sometimes its history and the reasons why it became part of the collection. Too often texts for panels, labels and captions are written by specialists for specialists, overestimating the basic knowledge of the general public. In order to avoid the mistake of presenting texts which are too complex and represent an intellectual barrier for visitors, museum professionals now can rely on many publications, guidelines, guidebooks, etc. which illustrate how to write effective texts for museums<sup>2</sup>. But interpretation doesn't only mean writing in clear, simple language, using an appropriate font and easy to read colours. It also means developing a narrative which tells about the culture that produced the objects, the contexts from which they originate, but also their meaning in contemporary societies. Interpretation is traditionally the task of experts or curators, who are the authoritative voice of museums. However, in recent years, more and more museums working in an intercultural perspective have increasingly started to re-examine and re-assess existing collections using different perspectives and taking into account the viewpoint of individuals and communities. One example for all is offered by the project "Collective Conversations", which the Manchester Museum started in 2004. In 2001 the museum had set up a Community Advisory Panel to "... debate, identify and articulate the needs and interests of diverse communities to create a culturally inclusive representation in the Museum". When the Advisory Panel expressed concern that the collection was largely under-used by the surrounding local communities and lacked important information regarding its history and community context, the museum responded by setting up a programme with the objective of working collaboratively with communities and academics – to explore the meaning of objects - most of which were in store – and share stories, beliefs and opinions about them.

1 E. Hoogstraat, A. Vels Heijn, *De leertheorie van Kolb in het museum*, Amsterdam 2006

K. Gibbs, M.Sani, J. Thompson, *Lifelong learning in Museums. A European Handbook*, Ferrara, 2007

2 B. Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Washington DC, 2015

It consisted in organizing a series of “conversations” with diverse groups and individuals - local migrant communities, researchers, people who culturally identify with particular objects, etc. - which were filmed and made available both on YouTube and on screens in the gallery displays. In 2007 a designated space to record these live conversations – a fully equipped studio called “Contact Zone” - was set up, with a layout which recreated the atmosphere of sitting around a fire telling stories. Since then, the Museum has continued to collect stories, adding new interpretations and perspectives to its collections and integrating these narratives in its displays. As a result of the programme, the museums increased the levels of use and awareness of the collections and included community voices in interpretation, documentation and display. It also created a new model for the museum sector and a new way of working, which eventually involved all museum staff in providing opportunities for interested individuals from communities to actively, meaningfully and directly engage with museum collections. Museum guides and mediators also play a very important role in interpreting museum collections and making them intellectually accessible. They are key figures to build bridges between people and heritage. Therefore, some museums have invested on them and on their training, to equip them not only to provide visitors with facts and figures, but to create a meaningful and enriching dialogue with the public<sup>3</sup>. Wanting to introduce heritage to a multicultural audience, some institutions have trained refugees and migrants to be museum guides<sup>4</sup>, so as to remove, or at least reduce intercultural barriers.

### **Digital accessibility**

Via digital means museums and heritage organizations can increase access and participation in ways which were unthinkable of until only a few years ago. Not only through the Internet and social media museums can reach a new and different audience if compared with the one that goes through the doors, but thanks to technologies they can tailor information to visitors’ specific characteristics, interests and needs and complement physical visits with additional materials to be used in remote. Through the “map my visit” functionality of the audio-guide and a customized link to their email address, visitors to Amsterdam museums for example, can check what they may have missed during their visit or go deeper into some objects they looked at, thereby taking content home and having it permanently accessible. In institutions like the Tylers in Haarlem, which has remained unchanged since the 18th century, technology is essential for interpreting specimens and enabling the museum to speak to today’s audiences. If fossils and scientific instruments are displayed exactly as they were in the 1780s with their original labels, on the Internet 3D models allow a closer look, taking them apart and understanding their functioning. And what is no longer there, can easily be seen via digital means, virtual reality, etc., like in the case of archaeological sites or even of places like Anne Frank’s house, where the Secret Annex, not easily accessible via a narrow staircase, can be visited through a virtual tour and virtually experienced as it was when inhabited by Anne and her family, whereas in reality it is bare and unfurnished, following Otto Frank’s wish.

3 P. Katzenstein, I. Koster, *I ASK: Methodology and Training Handbook*, Amsterdam, 2014

4 This has been the case with the Berlin State museums and the German Historical Museum which have trained refugees from Syria and Iraq to provide tours in their native language. It is also the case with the Brera Museum in Milan and with numerous institutions throughout Europe.

## Conclusions

Museums as institutions in the service of society must regard accessibility as a fundamental and long term commitment. Many projects can be named that use creative and innovative approaches to widen access and engage diverse audiences. In all of them, these elements seem to be key:

- ♣ Forward planning and the existence of an access policy;
- ♣ Consulting and involving users through advisory or focus groups in order to really understand their needs and provide solutions;
- ♣ Establishing partnerships with stakeholders and especially with organizations representing individuals with special needs;
- ♣ Training staff, from curators to front of house, in customer care, equality and diversity, audience development.

I would like to conclude by quoting Mark O'Neill and his distinction of the Three Models of Museums<sup>5</sup>:

- ♣ The **Elite Model**, which sees the core museum practices of collecting, research and display as purposes carried out for their own sake;
- ♣ The **Welfare Model**, where functions such as education, marketing and outreach are a sort of adds on, which don't change the elitist nature of the organization;
- ♣ The **Social Justice Model**, which accepts the fact that museums, like all social institutions, are embedded in society and should contribute to help society meet its standards of justice.

"Welfare and Social Justice museums may employ similar numbers of staff and engage in similar activities. However, in the former engagement with people is a separate function and is often dependent on project funding...In the Social Justice Model engagement with people is recognized as being the responsibility of all staff, is strategically integrated into the structure...all staff are responsible for access and the core displays are built on accessible principles." The truly accessible museum is therefore an institution which ensures that equality of access is embedded in its culture and in its organizational structures and not simply an 'add-on' service.

<sup>5</sup> M. O'Neill, *Museum Access – Welfare or Social Justice in Heritage, Regional Development and Social Cohesion*, Ostersund 2011

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