

ICOM-CECA Conference 2005

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is an organization of museum professionals committed to the conservation, study and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, the latter being tangible or intangible. Created in 1946, ICOM gathers 20 000 members from 140 countries, with the main component bodies including 116 National Committees and 29 International Committees

The Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) is one of the oldest International Committees of ICOM. With nearly 1,000 members coming from about 70 countries, CECA is also one of its largest Committees. Members are professionals working in different sectors of the museum field, as educators, curators, professors, communication agents or interpreters interested in education and cultural action.

This year's annual ICOM-CECA meeting was held in Slovakia from the 17th to 23rd September and explored the theme of Partnership. The conference took place in the historic mining town of BANSKÁ STIAVNICA and in the capital, BRATISLAVA

There were four days of presentations, which at certain times felt too intense. Each day focused on a particular theme, covering in total: politicians as partners, audience as partner, sponsors as partner, and interest groups as partners. In addition, there was a research session and time dedicated to market of ideas.

The presentations reflected the museum learning trends that exist in each country and the issues facing the museum professionals. The concept of partnership was used differently in the various papers. In a keynote speech, Michael Cassin referred to museum learning partnerships as 'dancing couples' and that metaphor was used through out the conference. Some papers described images of harmonious, caring or passionate dancing partners while others referred to aching feet, being out-of-tune and stepping on each other's toes.

Some of the most memorable papers were the following:

Patrick Greene from the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne presented a research study on visitors' motivations. As the director of his organization he favors the idea that visitors are grouped by their behaviors and reason's for attending, rather than on socio-demographic data. Age and social class could unnecessarily 'label' visitors.

Lynda Kelly's presentations on partnerships with the indigenous people and how a relationship between the Australian Museum in Sydney and indigenous people that started in the 70s was revisited and evaluated now. She emphasized the need for long-term commitment and mutual goodwill in order to develop sustainable partnerships.

Lynda Kelly's presentation on consulting with audiences with disabilities. It was especially interesting to hear how using people of mixed abilities in the same discussion group was beneficial for both the attendees and also stimulated useful discussions for the museum.

Arja van Veldhuizen's presentation was on the CODA institution in the Netherlands, which merged the library, the archive and the museum services in one. She shared her challenge to work with three different professionals (an archivist, a librarian and

a museum educator) in order to deliver the educational services of the new institution. Merging services together and change management need to be dealt with sensitively.

Mila Chiovatto from the State Art Gallery in Sao Paulo talked about building trust and developing programmes with vulnerable youth groups in Brazil. Museums in Brazil are rethinking their role as social institutions and their responsibility to enhance the education of underprivileged groups.

Andrea Fairchild talked about a future research project of the Concordia University Montreal on the impact of museography. She is interested in developing instruments to analyze exhibitions from an educational perspective in order to grasp the impact they have on visitors meaning-making. Hopefully, her results would be communicated in forthcoming venues.

Rakel Petursdottir from the National Gallery in Iceland presented the use of the audience's mobile phones in receiving information about art. Visitors could use their mobile or borrow one from the gallery and use it to learn more about the works of arts or the artists.

Gunhild Aaby presented the 'cultural schoolbag' a Norwegian national initiative that supports educational programmes on art and culture. The government's aim is that every school child gets access to cultural programmes. Grants are given to artists and museums to develop activities that enhance learning.

Julia Cordova-Gonzales from Chile presented an exhibition for families and schools that was conceived and developed by undergraduate students. Museum Studies students are an enthusiastic and dedicated resource. Such partnerships between museums and universities tend to be very beneficial for both.

Two days were dedicated on museum fieldtrips. In the wider region of BANSKÁ STIAVNICA participants could choose from the following:

Mining Traditions and their Presentation to the Public
Museums in the Area, their Exhibitions and Public Programs
Lakes and Nature
Villages and Regional Crafts

I attended the villages & regional crafts fieldtrip, which included demonstrations of pipe making, barrel making, horses & carriages and visits to a woodcarving workshop, three folk life museums and a bio-farm. The Museum that most impressed me was a small folklore museum inspired by Andreja Kmeta in his home village. The museum was conceived, developed and run by the local community for the local community. The two rooms seemed to have captured the essence of the museum as a social centre for the community. Homemade drinks and sweets were offered in every venue enabling us to experience the Slovak folklore with all our senses. Therefore, not inappropriately, we renamed the tour as the 'drinking & eating' one!

On the study tour of the Bratislava Museums, everyone visited exhibitions in the Castle, the National Gallery and the City Museum. Additionally, I attended a traveling exhibition on Hans Christian Anderson in the Bibiana International House of Art for Children. Through a

warm blue mystical environment and with the use of both mechanical & computer interactives visitors were introduced (or re-introduced) to his fairy tales. Funnily, the weekend I went all other visitors were adults, who appeared to enjoying the exhibition themselves.

The CECA annual meetings are very special events. Each year, they move to a different country and the whole organisation is often the result of a passionate and committed individual. The meetings give the host-country a chance to share its culture. Most of us knew very little about Slovakia upon our arrival but left with a better understanding of its people, its museums and traditions. Folkore music and dances, the mining customs, traditional food and Slovak memorabilia enhanced our stay. Marion Ciz and his colleagues touched us by their hard work, hospitality, generosity and careful planning of every detail. We were looked after for over sixteen hours per day. Finally, CECA meetings offer colleagues from the host country and the wider region the opportunity to meet international participants, share ideas, express frustrations and pose questions.

To me CECA meetings feel like a family- reunion. They are different to any other professional meetings that I have been. For a week, one is with the same group of people and shares more than professional interests. One tends to share dreams, passions, fears ... and more than professional contacts, one creates long lasting friendships.

Next year's conference will take place in Rome from 2-7 October 2006.

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