

Debating museum ethics

Seminar, April 16th 2010, 13.00-18.00

The Museum of Copenhagen, 59 Vesterbrogade, 1620 København

Museum ethics is a broad field. In 2004 ICOM issued a revised version of the Code of Ethics covering almost all areas of museum work today. There are, however, a number of areas in present museum work which could be termed grey zones, areas which seem to conflict with the Code of Ethics.

Museum employees are constantly faced with situations presenting ethical dilemmas. They concern, among other things, questions about exhibitions and representation – how far can we go in the construction of the narrative for the benefit of the public? Are some stories too problematic to be told or some materials too sensitive to be shown? One particularly controversial area regards human remains. When do human remains constitute scientific material not differing from for instance animal bones or manmade tools, and when do they represent a deceased person deserving sensitive treatment in the entire museum process from excavation to exhibition?

Another area where ethical dilemmas are often at stake is in regard to events and activities taking place at the museum. Museums are part of a heritage industry depending on high visitor numbers and this has led at times to quite creative developments in museum activities. In the last couple of years, Danish ICOM has, for instance, witnessed museums renting their premises to auction houses or even offering museum visitors the opportunity to bring their collectables to the museum to have them evaluated by auctioneers. Such events go against the Code of Ethics, which states that members of the museum profession should not participate directly or indirectly in any kind of trade in natural and cultural heritage. Thus it seems highly important to discuss this development in the light of the Code of Ethics: Does the Code of Ethics represent a straightjacket to museums struggling to survive in the experience economy?

The Code of Ethics dates back to the first set of rules from 1970, which primarily concerned museum acquisitions, as many museums at that time, including those in Denmark, would acquire objects without knowledge of their provenance, and thus directly or indirectly participated in the international trade in cultural and natural heritage. Owing to the lack of legal instruments, such acquisitions were legal, even in cases where the objects in question were illegally exported from their country of origin. The Danish Government has just decided to ratify the UNIDROIT Convention, which will be an important element in the prevention of illegal trade in cultural and natural heritage and deliver the legal instruments for return and restitution in case it happens anyway. But this convention does not have any retroactive force and consequently doesn't apply to most of the cases Danish museums are facing. In such cases ethics and not law will be the main argument. How should Danish museum professionals deal with demands for the return of objects appropriated for instance in colonial times or the 1970s?

Thus there are several subjects to be discussed when considering present day museum practice from the perspective of ICOM's Code of Ethics. We would therefore like to invite the Danish museum community to take part in the debate at the seminar in April arranged in cooperation with the Heritage Council of Denmark and in connection with the general board meeting of ICOM Denmark. We wish to encourage the seminar participants to take part in

the debate and bring to the panel any ethical dilemmas they experience in their particular field.

Programme:

11.00-12.00 Annual meeting of ICOM Denmark (in Danish)

12.00-13.00 Lunch

13.00-13.15 Welcome: Head of the museum department, The Danish Heritage Agency, Ole Winther and chair of ICOM Denmark Vinnie Nørskov

13.15-13.45 President of ICOM Alissandra Cummins: ICOMs ethical rules

13.45-14.15 Chair of ICOM's Ethics Committee Bernice Murphy: grey zone cases from an international perspective

14.15-14.45 Caitlin Griffith, Museums Association: grey zone problems in the UK

14.45-15.15 NN: The British Museum and ethics

15.15-15.45 Coffee break

15.45-17.45 Panel debate: ICOM's Code of Ethics and the grey zones of museum practise

Anne Højer Petersen, Fuglsang Art Museum

Peter Pentz, The National Museum,

Thomas Söderqvist, Medical Museion

Jette Sandal, The Museum of Copenhagen

Eva Mäher, Norwegian ICOM Norway

Mille Gabriel, Danish ICOM Denmark

Henning Camre, The Danish UNESCO Commission

Chair: Journalist Lotte Folke Kaarsholm

For further information, please contact Vinnie Nørskov, klavn@hum.au.dk, tel. 8942 2061

For registration and lunch (80 Dkr), please email: mtj@museumstjenesten.com, or call Museumstjenesten tel. 8666 7677 or 2178 8966