

Giovanni PINNA

The intellectual organisation of museums

Abstract

Museums are very special companies whose primary product, the cultural growth of the community through identification with its own cultural heritage, is difficult to quantify. To enable economic assessment, we tend to consider the secondary products: entry fees, the sale of products linked to the image of the museum, the sale of services to the public. This has led us to consider the structural organisation of museums and their staff in the same terms as a manufacturing company, i.e. with a view to optimising the profitability of these secondary products. We have failed to analyse the aspects of museums' internal organisation and the characteristics of their staff which guarantee the production and spreading of their primary product: the intellectual organisation of museums and the professionalism of museum operators in the scientific and cultural field. The paper discusses these two aspects of museums.

1. The intellectual organisation of museums

An analysis of the intellectual mechanisms adopted within complex museums, a survey of the cultural relations between members of staff and the assessment of the relationship between museums and visitors has led me to reflect on museum organisation.

I have come to two conclusions, neither of each is in line with the current thinking of Italian museology: 1) museums should not be run by managers without any scientific competence or authoritativeness, 2) the scientific staff of museums must be highly specialised in a precise scientific-cultural area; curators must have attended a postgraduate school, and cannot merely have a general degree, such as those on the "conservation of cultural heritage".

Regarding the first of these two aspects of museology¹, certain recent events would seem to confirm my opinion. I am referring particularly to the Guggenheim Foundation which, with its communicative aggressiveness, until recently was hailed as a monument to productive efficiency in the culture economy, and which has now seen the closure of its Las Vegas centre² and the abandonment of its great projects.³

¹ Maresca Compagna, Cabasino (1998).

² El Guggenheim de Las Vegas sierra a los 15 meses de su inauguración. La Vanguardia, Barcelona, 29 November 2002.

³ El Guggenheim renuncia al gran museo diseñado por Gehry para Manhattan. La Vanguardia, Barcelona, 1-2 January 2003.

If we look at Italy, it cannot be said that the theories of culture economy and the running of museums by managers have produced great results. In Italy several Museum Foundations were set up based on an economic theory that considered it possible to establish foundations without funds, with virtual assets consisting only in the hope of generous donations from private citizens. These Foundations now struggle not only with a lack of capital (due to the absence of the substantial private donations that the economic theory assured would be forthcoming) but also a lack of culture, since all their energy is invested in the search for funds which are vital for survival.



*Archaeological museum
Istanbul*

Photo: Giovanni Pinna

Much has been written about the culture economy, and museums run much like manufacturing companies.⁴ At the same time new laws have been produced by the state and regions on the management of museums and cultural heritage. I do not wish to be sceptical, but it seems to me that as far as the management of Italian cultural heritage is concerned the only reference law remains the fascist Law no. 1089 (1939). The recent body of Italian laws have merely dented the surface, and have certainly not revolutionised Italian museology.

An article by David Alcaud⁵ on this subject, published in 2001, is enlightening. Although the author tries hard to demonstrate that there has been a "miracle à l'italienne" in the management and organisation of museums, the events examined in the article demonstrate that the new laws, the organisational reforms of the Ministry for cultural heritage, the agreements sealed between the Ministry and the Italian Manufacturers' Association, the trend towards regional decentralisation or other solutions, have only superficially changed Italian museums as a whole. More acceptable opening hours to the public than in the past, cafeterias, shops, bookshops and educational sections which develop activities aimed primarily at schoolchildren have not made inroads into the obsolete intellectual organisation of Italian museums. Indeed, no new law, no code, no management autonomy to date has influenced the contents of museums. No regulations, no general policy law, no public-private agreement has transformed Italian museums from centres of conservation to centres of scientific research, cultural elaboration and production. An archaic conception of heritage and museums, accompanied by unbending and frustrating bureaucracy, isolates the individual intellectualities that work within museums preventing Italian institutions from developing the cultural debate which elsewhere produces what I have many times called "museum culture", which is what a museum must transmit to individual visitors and to society as a whole.

It seems to me that the current debate on Italian museology does not ad-

⁴ Zan (1999), Bagdadli (1997).

⁵ Alcaud (2001).

dress the question of the intellectual organisation of museums, or the need for them to be centres of cultural production as they are elsewhere, but rather dwells upon the administrative setting of museums.⁶ In addition, when the cultural aspect is considered, the productive role of museums often tends to be denied, as this is considered a prerogative of the universities.⁷

In the current frenzy of passion for company-oriented museums, it should be remembered that what are considered the main missions of a museum, i.e. the collection and conservation of objects of art, history or science, always have a greater aim: the creation of cultural heritage. This is not achieved merely by the passive conservation of objects or through their dogmatic display, but by carrying out a variety of actions: selection, analysis, scientific processing and creation of meaning. This means that the creation of heritage must take place parallel to the creation of a museum culture: a specific, subjective, culture which makes every museum unique.

Developing a museum culture is a complex process which has important repercussions for the organisation of museums and which is in clear contrast to the current tendency towards uniformity of organisation and mechanisms for cultural action and communication in Italian museums as a whole.

To create its own culture and defend and propose its own identity a museum must be a place of internal mediation. It cannot, and, indeed, must not, be a place of mediation with the outside world.

This means that, within a museum, there must be a dialectic process in which the various members of the intellectual staff take part. This, through mediation, gives rise to the specific culture of the museum, with which every individual can identify. If this does not happen, if the mediation is unsuccessful, the members of the intellectual staff will not work together to develop a global museum culture, or will develop separately from one another. The consequence of this is that, without its own culture, the museum will not have a product to communicate, and since communication is the final act in the creation of heritage, the museum also loses its main cultural function.

So, while internal mediation is indispensable for the communicative and productive capacity of a museum, mediation with other cultures, e.g. other museums, universities and academies, has a negative effect on this function. It is very simple: if each museum creates its own culture and has its own view of the world, its own historical or cultural truth, different museums will be unlikely to share the same "truths". For the same reason, a given museum will be unlikely to share the "truths" which



*National museum Athens
Photo: Giovanni Pinna*

⁶ dell'Orso (2002), Jalla (2000).

⁷ Settis (2002), chapter VIII: "Educazione all'arte, formazione dei quadri".

emerge in other places of cultural production. This lack of shared ideas should be encouraged as it means keeping the cultural individuality of museums alive and, with it, their capacity to communicate.

Naturally this does not mean that debate or comparison with other cultural institutions should be refused, but that they should take place on an equal footing, without being conditioned by the prejudices or false scale of values that society often uses when classifying its components.



*National museum
Belgrade*

Photo: Giovanni Pinna

Maintaining the individuality and originality of its culture is strictly linked to the museum's ability to communicate and the effectiveness of the communication process. A museum without its own original culture of communication, would act like a scholastic structure, limiting itself to transmitting information, ideas and meanings which are not its own. It would not be able to form a relationship with the public, but would be merely a teaching tool and not a place of production.

Two conditions are necessary for the culture of a museum to take shape: firstly, within the museum there must be individual cultures to mediate between and secondly this mediation must be entrusted to an institutional figure capable of carrying it out.

The first condition is met if each member of the museum's scientific staff has their own culture, has formed their own scientific identity in relation to the collections in their charge and the pertinent disciplines. Staff of this kind must be highly specialised. They would need to have been trained specifically in those subjects related to the collections that they must safeguard, study and communicate. This leads me to conclude that the pattern of education which is emerging in Italy for those who will be called upon to work in museums is deeply wrong and should be reversed. The general degree courses now available, such as those "on cultural heritage", should be postgraduate courses to be undertaken after a degree in a single subject. In short, I feel it makes more sense to specialise in the management of archaeological, history of art, zoological or architectural heritage rather than give a smattering of all these disciplines to students fresh out of secondary school and hope that they will subsequently develop scientific competence individually.

The second condition is only met if the management of a museum is in the hands of someone who is a scientific and cultural authority and is recognised as such by all of the museum's intellectual staff. Only a director of great intellectual and scientific calibre is capable of the cultural mediation necessary to create a museum culture. Managerial or administrative management is inherently detached from the intellectual reality of the museum and as such not recognised on a scientific level. Lacking appropriate skills, this kind of management is unable not only to carry out any mediation and cultural construction

but also to identify the internal cultures of the museum to mediate between. The tendency to take management away from figures of scientific authority, to whom museums traditionally have always been entrusted, at least in Europe, and to place at the helm administrative staff or managerial figures, pleading the need for management which guarantees greater cost saving, can only be seen as the reduction or possible elimination of the cultural function of museums. Furthermore, the failure to develop an autonomous original museum culture may open up the doors to historical and political manipulation.

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