

Introduction to historic house museums

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In November 1997, a major conference entitled Abitare la storia: Le dimore storiche-museo (Inhabiting History: Historical House Museums) was held in Genoa, the city of many palaces. On this occasion, the historic house museum, a rather particular type of museum, was extensively discussed for the very first time. The specific nature and values of such museums were highlighted. Over forty experts, who are responsible for palaces and more modest residences, came to Genoa for the conference. They debated aspects of restoration, security, teaching and communication. The conference participants took the opportunity to express their wish for the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to set up an international committee more specifically dedicated to historic house museums. They asked ICOM Italia, which was also present at the conference, to support their recommendation for the creation of the new committee, and this was done in 1998. Giovanni Pinna is the chairman of this newly created International Committee for Historic House Museums. He is president of the ICOM Italian Committee and also president of the ICOM International Committee for Museology of Historic Sites. A palaeontologist by training, he directed the Museum of Natural History in Milan from 1981 to 1996. He has published some sixty books and articles on various topics in the domain of theoretical museology as well as on the history and functions of museum institutions. His books include Museo: Storia e funzioni di una macchina culturale dal cinquecento a oggi (1980) and Fondamenti teorici per un Museo di Storia Naturale (1997).

The creation in 1998 of the International Committee for Historic House Museums (DemHist) by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), following the proposals put forward by ICOM Italia after a ground-breaking conference on historic house museums held in Genoa in 1997, was based on a number of scientific and cultural considerations relating to historic house museums. In particular, emphasis was placed on the fact that historic houses, when they are open to the public and conserved in their original condition (i.e. with the furnishings and collections made by the people who used to live in them) and have not been converted to accommodate collections put together from different sources, constitute a museum category of a special and rather varied kind. Historic house museums comply with museological and technical museographic constraints that are different from those used in other museums. Their category is different because historic houses may comprise sites of all sizes and kinds, ranging from royal palaces to residences of powerful personages, the houses of famous personages, artist's studios, rich bourgeois houses and even modest cottages.

The historic house is certainly an incomparable and unique museum in that it is used to conserve, exhibit or reconstruct real atmospheres which are difficult to manipulate (except to a very slight extent) if one does not wish to alter the very meaning of 'historic house'. The historic house museum is unlike other museum categories because it can grow only by bringing together original furnishings and collections from one or other of the historic periods in which the house was used. And, unlike the situation in most museums, the blending of furnishings and objects of many different kinds in the historic house museum requires the

careful use of conservation methods that are consistent with variety. The structure of the historic house, the impossibility of changing its interior space or the furnishings and objects exhibited raises problems in terms of security norms, the organization of public visits and the safeguarding of the heritage exhibited. Last but not least, the significance of the historic house, in which emphasis is placed not on the value of individual objects but on the whole set of objects and its interaction with the spirit of the people who lived in the house, poses special problems in terms of communication with the public.

The power of history

But there is another aspect of the historic museum house which I believe must be addressed: this is the power of these museums, more than any others, to evoke history and put the visitor into direct contact with it. This aspect of the historic house takes on special importance against the background of another exclusive characteristic of the historic house, that is, its immutable significance and the impossibility of manipulating that meaning with the same ease with which objects can be made to tell different stories in other museums.

The historic house museum is 'fossilized': the furnishings and possibly also the layout and use of space are immutable and cannot be modified or altered without falsifying history. In many such houses, in particular royal palaces, visitors must find their way among different and often contrasting meanings and symbols. Palaces are notorious for changing hands according to the political vagaries of the regime of the country. For instance, in the royal palace of Naples, we find vestiges of the Bourbons, Napoleonic France and the

House of Savoy. The choice of emphasis on a particular occupant is therefore often political. Today in Italy, the choice has fallen on the Bourbons whose presence is far more evident than that of Joachim Murat and the House of Savoy. The choice is explained by the fact that this palace was the focal point of the reign of the Bourbons, but not of the House of Savoy (the presence of Murat was minimal); then again, the people of Naples today wish to rediscover their own historic roots as a way of countering a certain loss of national identity that has characterized the Italian Republic since the Second World War. This example reveals the strict limit to the manipulation of history which historic houses permit: however, it also reveals a fundamental aspect in the general context of the relationship between museology and power.

Museums have become extremely popular places to visit so much so that, in Europe at least, the most famous are staggering under the weight of visitors. Tourists of all types are thronging to the museums, wandering in herds and gaggles through rooms displaying paintings, archaeological vestiges or ethnographic artefacts, stopping *en masse* in the boutiques to buy postcards and souvenirs and flocking to the cafeterias for refreshment. In the great atrium of the Louvre under the pyramid, the noise generated by the hundreds of visitors is reminiscent of the sounds heard under the iron vaulting of a large railway station. Whatever their cultural background, tourists would consider it inconceivable to visit London, Florence, Venice or New York without at least a brief excursion to the National Gallery, the Uffizi, the Galleria dell'Accademia or the MOMA. No travel agency today omits a museum visit from its package tour of the major capitals. So museums are fashionable. They attract

visitors. So much so that all a city known to be dull and unpopular need do in order to take its place on the regular tourist circuit is to construct a museum monument, even if it is bereft of any significant museum content.

Beyond the fashion of the moment, what is it that draws the public to museums? Why have these institutions, which in some cases have existed for several centuries, become so important today? The answer is simple and well known: museums accommodate the past, the traditions and the minds of people. They mirror the community and the nation, they are places in which the collective memory is created and preserved places where the members of these communities and nations find their own identity. In recent years, interest in museums has grown in inverse proportion to globalization, although at the same rate: the more uniform the world tends to become, the more its individual communities look for their own roots and specific characteristics preserved in museums. The members of communities and countries would seem to be seeking refuge from globalization and uniformity in museums, symbolized in their minds at least as the last bastions of specificity and diversity. For similar reasons, a tourist visit to a museum has become essential to discover and understand the specific features of the people of a foreign country.

A new museology

This surprising interest in museums has generated a new type of museology worldwide. Museologists, communications experts, architects and designers have begun to discuss the formal aspects of the museum, the organization of visitor flows, exhibition techniques and security,

while economists and managers have begun to propose management models which are more or less economically viable. Sociologists, political scientists, historians and philosophers are also inquiring into the mechanisms by which objects communicate with visitors, the way in which collective memory is born and conserved and the social and political significance of museums.

The outcome of all this has been a profusion of museological manuals and treatises, conferences, courses specializing in new and old museology and also an incredible increase in the number of museums. But this has also been an opportunity for those who hold any form of power, or shape the destinies of the community, to become aware of the fact that museums are instruments of communication at least on a par with television and newspapers. The communication power of museums stems from their capacity to put across information through real objects which, by the very fact that they are real, are regarded by visitors as impossible to manipulate, unlike words and pictures. The museum therefore acquires, in the eyes of its public, much greater authority than the audiovisual media or the press. That authority derives from the fact that it is thought to hold the truth in every case.

In actual fact, things are not like that and the political use of museums by undemocratic, or barely democratic, regimes has taught us that the content of a museum can easily be manipulated. Because of its very authority, the museum is therefore a powerful instrument of pressure and political indoctrination. There is no country in the world, including the nations which pride themselves on having the most democratic regimes, in which dominant social groups, be they

politicians, sociologists, economists, ethnologists or religious leaders, do not control or try to control museums and their contents. Museums therefore often become venues for ideological encounters, political confrontations and social tension places in which the factions of society fighting for supremacy tend to impose their own particular cultural model and vision of history.

Although it is difficult to define the mechanisms by which a power group uses the museum to exercise control over society, because of the many different paths that may be taken, the main lines of the phenomenon can be described. Excluding groups that seize power by force to set up autocratic regimes, control over society by a particular social, economic or political group is achieved by the growing authority of that group.

The history of power

Authority is not synonymous with consensus; instead, it creates a kind of legitimacy in the everyday management of power. Today any group can acquire authority and legitimacy the interpretation or manipulation of history; it acquires legitimacy by appropriating the history of the community and carefully building a linear history. By doing so, it claims to be the natural heir to that history and acquires authority based wherever possible on that history, laying down ever-deeper roots in the past. Museums as institutions which conserve history and the memory of history are ideal instruments for handling these two operations. In most cases, under the control of the established power, which acts by all kinds of different means (laws, personal selection, financing methods etc.), museums take measures whose ultimate purpose is

to create an authoritative image for the ruling group.

It is in this framework that historic houses converted into museums take on special value and significance. More than any other kind of museum, the historic house museum in fact has the power to evoke and create links between the visitor and the history present in the house itself, or which it seeks to represent. Unlike other museums, the historic house does not derive its importance from a range of objects with a symbolic significance of their own. It is highly evocative because not only does it contain objects, it also embodies the creative imagination of the people who lived and moved within its walls, who made daily use of the objects that were the original furnishings. Seen in this way, the historic house is the symbol of events, epochs and regimes which cannot be eliminated without destroying the house itself.

The significance of the historic house is therefore either completely accepted or completely rejected. One striking example is what the Italian Government and the House of Savoy did at the dawn of national unity. Early in the second half of the nineteenth century, the governments and ruling house enacted a policy designed to destroy the symbols of the old Italian states by dispersing their cultural heritage. Items of that heritage were taken away and used to furnish the residences of the new rulers. The aim was obvious: to compose a new national unity by breaking up old political realities.

Conceptual challenges for museology

This small example underlines the importance of political symbols for both history and culture. It also explains why analysis

and discussion are now a focal point in the committee created by ICOM. At present, the work of the DemHist committee is being pursued through a series of analyses whose purpose is to identify the characteristics of historic house museums and to discuss the problems connected with their management. Themes for further study and discussion must be identified. This will lead to a better understanding of the historic house museum while enabling solutions to be found for the new management problems arising in this diverse field.

However, identification of the themes and problems inherent in the museology of historic houses is possible only if the underlying object, whose themes and problems are evoked, can itself be defined, so making it possible to define the nature and functions of the historic house museum in its socio-cultural environment.

Definition of the nature and functions of the historic house museum is certainly one of the most delicate tasks which the DemHist committee will have to perform. It is essential to maintain clarity in a sector where public bodies coexist with private operators, and where foundations take action in terms of purely cultural missions alongside financial groups seeking to make purely economic use of the historic heritage of buildings. Moreover, the object itself varies in quality: very old and properly conserved historic houses coexist with coarse reconstructions.

Classification problems

By defining the nature and tasks involved, the committee may be able to arrive at a definition of the historic house museum as an absolute, entity. However, such an

absolute definition, with the exclusions or inclusions that it implies, requires a broader knowledge of the varied world of historic houses, with an inventory and classification of the existing typologies.

To the best of my knowledge, no exhaustive classification of historic houses exists at present. In 1993, S. Butcher-Youngmans proposed an initial classification of historic houses into three broad categories (*Historic House Museums*, Oxford University Press, 1993):

- *Documentary historic house museums* recount the life of a personage or place of historical or cultural interest in which the environments must contain the original objects, and if possible in their original layout.
- *Representative historic house museums* document a style, an epoch or a way of life. In these environments, settings may be reconstructed using items that are not originals: they may be either copies of the originals or pieces which did not belong to the house but were acquired on the market.
- *Aesthetic historic house museums* are places where private collections are exhibited that have nothing to do with the house itself, its history or its occupants.

A second approach to a classification was presented at the Genoa Congress in 1997 by Rosanna Pavoni and Ornella Selvafolta (published as 'La diversità delle dimore-museo: opportunità di una riflessione', in L. Leoncini and F. Simonetti (eds.), *Abitare la storia*, pp. 32–6, Turin, Umberto Allemandi, 1998). These two authors saw an imperative need to break down the unity of the definition of the house-museum, and recognized instead several

different subcategories: royal palaces, houses dedicated to illustrious men, houses created by artists, houses dedicated to a style or an epoch, houses of collectors, historic houses as a setting for contents, family houses, houses with a specific socio-cultural identity.

I do not wish to go into the merits of this classification, on which research is continuing. However, beginning with the Butcher-Youngmans classification, I would like to highlight the fundamental difference between a historic house and a historic house museum: the latter goes beyond the edifice as such to include the collections and original furnishings. This integrity of the overall project gives the historic house museum an ability to evoke the past, which in turn makes it a monument of great social and political significance. In that sense, Butcher-Youngmans' 'aesthetic historic house museums' certainly do not fall into the category of historic house museums. There is room for further discussion of 'representative historic house museums', although the most intransigent museologists warn us against the reconstructions of artefacts from old houses. They maintain that the transition from the mere reconstruction of furnishings to a kind of Disneyland reconstruction of medieval castles is all too easy, so manipulating history for commercial purposes.

While a definition of the historic house museum and a classification is currently the primary task of the DemHist Committee, other themes will have to be considered and other problems solved in relation to the museology of historic houses: the symbolic social and political significance of historic house museums; the historic gardens of historic houses; problems of restoration and conservation; the ethical problems bound up with total