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The International Politics of Museums

Introduction

Museums and galleries do not exist independently of the societies that they are a part of. Equally, they do not exist independently of the wider patterns of thought, argument, expectation and belief that are to be found at the international level of organisation and action (Sylvester, 2009, 3–6). These international factors have an important part to play in the establishment of legitimations for the variety of museum practices and customs in different countries and regions of the world, as well as in providing justifications and rationalisations for the entire museum enterprise: Duncan (1995, 16), for example, argues that ‘through most of the nineteenth century, an international museum culture remained firmly committed to the idea that the first responsibility of a public art museum is to enlighten and improve its visitors morally, socially and politically’, thus providing a purpose and focus for museums that was rooted in an accepted set of ideas that were commonly shared. In practice, the world of museums today is neither simply the product of some basic human need to collect and exhibit material that is meaningful to groups and societies, nor simply the result of some evolutionary development that can be explained as leading, in the traditionally Whiggish fashion, to a continually better set of collections, patterns of display, conservation techniques, exhibition and labelling. Instead there is a continuous process of argumentation about all these aspects of museums, with these debates taking place across a complex organisational, institutional and ideological universe that extends far beyond the borders of any one country. This chapter examines two inter-related international issues that affect how museums are understood and organised not only at the global level but also at the national
and local levels. These issues are concerned with the exercise of power in the international organisations, treaties and agreements that have been established in and for the museums sector, and with the relationship of the practices of museums curators, conservators and education staff with internationally sanctioned ideas of ‘best practice’, professionalism and organisational efficiency and effectiveness.

Almost inevitably these concerns will be seen to intersect with larger arguments concerning globalisation/glocalisation and the world of post-colonialism as both of these serve to locate the particular case of museums in the general context of international and longitudinal change, and which provide arguments that explain the nature of these developments and their specific effects on museums and museum practice. While this discussion demonstrates the complicated nature of the international politics of museums it also serves to show the importance of particular sets of professional actors in setting the context within which the national and local politics of museums take place. It equally explains why the setting of international standards is both difficult and extremely hard to police and enforce, and thus illustrates why so many pressing museum concerns have not been resolved despite international and national demands for their solution. The location of these particular museum concerns within the context of much wider geo-political matters reinforces the claim that the politics of museums involve much more than simply the interests of the actors and organisations that make up the museums sector itself but also concerns how museums and galleries have their own independent effects on the world of which they are a part.

‘It’s the Same the Whole World Over...’

International debates about museums take place over a range of issues, from claims about the roles of museums within the world as a whole to those concerning the governance of museums and museum collections. In the case of the former, the claims for the ‘universal’ nature of their status that were made by certain major museums in 2002 (Prott, 2009, 116–17) has continued to give rise to criticism that such universalism was merely a fig-leaf to cover a deeply patronising reassertion of the importance of western cultural values (O’Neill, 2004; see also, Duncan & Wallach, 1980), and a denigration of the claims of source communities for the return and/or restitution of items held in museum collections (Mathur, 2005). In the case of the latter, the differences in consideration of the critical components of effective conservation strategies not only