

Research and Museums

Tuesday, March 9th 2021, 6pm - 9pm
On digital platform

There is no need to rely on science to know that museums bring pleasure. However neuroscience has a lot to tell us about "the explosion of chemical substances (cortisol, endorphins, oxytocin...) that hit us when a work of art crosses our gaze"¹.

Museum ethics / research ethics

The links between research and museums are complex. In the eyes of "museum professionals", research is an inherent part of the profession. But what exactly are we talking about, what disciplines, what practices, what knowledge? Addressing this question now, at a time when museums around the world, closed then reopened, closed again and about to reopen... mainly focus on keeping their audience, is certainly in line with current events:

. As we have seen in recent months, it is at the very moment when all minds were focused on the health emergency that questions arose at the forefront of the scene, from many parts of the world and many "communities", strong questions about what museums are, where their collections come from, where they derive legitimacy from in order to tell a narrative...

. We keep coming back to this with the *new definition of museum* that ICOM suggested without probably anticipating the extent of the controversies that this would entail. Sociologists, museologists, historians, jurists, lexicologists... continue to argue about what makes a place *a museum* – and what does not. Perhaps we can start from the outset with the hypothesis that what distinguishes a museum (apart from its collection) from a cultural or leisure centre is that its approach is first and foremost scientific: the documentation of the collections, the knowledge of the objects, of their history and their journey, etc. are part of a process of methodical investigation that is characteristic of the "research" process and the museum, because it does so, vouches for the knowledge it transmits. What makes the museum a singular actor of the "social bond" is the trust thus won: the public believes that what it is given to see is "true", drawn from various sources, that the objects are authentic and that, whatever the field - arts, sciences, society, environment... - the content is reliable. For the general public, the museum is probably not perceived as a "scientific institution", but scientific rigour is at the heart of its deontology. It is moreover an obligation for museums in France to build a scientific and cultural project.

Science of museums, science for museums: are museums inclined to be more and more "scientific"?

However, this bond of trust is fragile: the recent heated debates on the conditions under which certain objects have been acquired and moved have revealed the delay and undoubtedly the inadequacy of the research carried out on their origins; the obvious role of museums in terms of research has been questioned. Everyone agrees today that the debate on "restitutions", and more broadly on the place and meaning of objects, can only move forward serenely with *research, a lot of research*. But this consensus does not say which disciplines contribute to this expertise, how they cooperate with each other, how relationships are organised between researchers and (other) museum professionals. Who does what and how do they articulate their work, through which functional, permanent or contractual links? ... From one country to another, the profiles of the professionals and these relationships differ and we can see the challenge of building bridges between often very different research systems and of bringing together the

¹ "Qui a conscience du tumulte intérieur qui naît en nous et de l'explosion de substances qui nous percute lorsqu'une œuvre croise notre regard?" Christophe Averty, "Quand la science prouve que l'art fait du bien", in *Le Monde*, October 22nd 2020. Online publication: https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2020/10/22/quand-la-science-prouve-que-l-art-fait-du-bien_6056952_3246.html (17/02/2021).

multiplicity of disciplines concerned by this research. We think of history, art history of course, but also of the "hard" sciences required to date, authenticate materials, identify routes and "accidents", ... the human and social sciences and even the political sciences when it is a question of reconstructing a social phenomenon or grasping the diplomatic implications or deepening what certain currents underlie, "decolonisation" for example.

It is important for all professionals to grasp the nature and diversity of the research / museum base, here and around the world: whether it concerns the work of professionals in museums, those who work on museums (sociologists whose it is the esearch, for example), those who work for museums: the laboratories of scientific organisations and universities and, in France, the highly original C2RMF (Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France).

The debate on March 9th does not aim to provide answers to all the questions, but for the professionals who will follow it, it aims to highlight the place of the *scientific mind* in practice and in training museum professions. The challenge of nurturing this spirit of research is decisive if museums are to remain at the heart of scientific dialogue between cultures, to shed light on the history of our societies, including painful stories. We know the risks of instrumentalization and inappropriate politicisation, even in museums.

The news of the pandemic have not slowed down this debate; perhaps on the contrary - through a resilience effect - it opens up the possibility of renewing our approaches to the link between museum / research. One thinks of the dialogue that could bring together, at this very moment, the scientific experts in health and those in museums to consider their role differently, less from the point of view of the circulation of a virus than from that of a resource in the face of the ills of our society, which is now often stressed. Some museums abroad even suggest museum by prescription...

Museums are already collecting "COVID's witness objects", because soon it will be up to them to remind us, through these tangible traces, what this strange history has been like.

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Openings

- **Charles Personnaz**, Director of the Institut national du patrimoine
- **Juliette Raoul-Duval**, President of ICOM France

Video intervention

- **Etienne Klein**, physicist and philosopher of science

Part 1 – Overview of research in museums in France and abroad

- **Eric de Chasse**y, Director, Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art
- **Christian Hottin**, Director of Studies, Institut national du patrimoine
- **Roland May**, Director, Centre Interdisciplinaire de Conservation et de Restauration du Patrimoine
- **Pascal Liévaux**, Delegation to inspection, research and innovation, Direction générale des patrimoines
- **Steph Scholten**, Director of the Hunterian, Glasgow University – Vice-President of UMAC

Moderation: **Juliette Raoul-Duval** and **Hélène Vassal** (ICOM France)

Part 2 – Research in museums faced with lively questions

- **Ariane James-Sarazin**, Assistant Director, Musée de l'Armée
- **Francis Duranthon**, Paleontologist – Director of the museums of Toulouse
- **Anne-Catherine Robert-Hauglustaine**, Director, Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace
- **André Delpuech**, Director, Musée de l'Homme

Moderation: **Laurence Isnard**, Head of the Office of Acquisitions, Restoration, Preventive Conservation and Research, French Museums Service

Synthesis by Christian Hottin

The session will be held in French, English and Spanish.

To participate in the event: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88288804783?pwd=anI4TDZMTHhhZzZlGSmRpendiT3VuUT09>

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