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A Common Engagement towards Effective Communication**

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Preface

Museum education is considered nowadays as one of the core functions of a museum. But how are the various messages to be delivered to the museum audience conceived? Where do the researchers, curators and educators meet? How does each see their role as mediator? How to operate the magic encounter which will allow any visitor to understand the most difficult topics in order to be able to enjoy the wonders exhibited in museums?

For the first time two ICOM international committees: Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) and Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) have decided to combine their efforts by organizing a joint conference in the outstanding venue of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. They have discussed during four days all the above issues so crucial for any researcher wanting to disseminate their knowledge and all educators conscious of the importance of spreading messages which are both scientifically correct and accessible to the public at large. Some 135 participants from all continents have attended the conference. The variety of papers has been grouped thematically allowing for both university researchers and museum educators to meet not only physically but also intellectually, revisiting the museum collections through multiple perspectives and interpretations. Surprising, engaging and involving the visitor, analyzing how his/her imagination functions or how to best reach him/her by efficient translation of research, without forgetting the core idea at the base of all good communication were topics which opened the conference. The reality of Egyptian museums was presented by both Egyptian researchers and museum curators and educators together with foreign curators who analysed the way we see the use of museums to promote inspiration and creativity taking into consideration that both mutual respect and cultural identity awareness are key issues and the success to all. Enhancing curiosity and imagination through exciting examples from Brazil, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Turkey, Taiwan, the UK, to mention but few have been pointed as main issues for a positive experience of the museum in times of crisis. A very inspiring conference, the outcome of which may lead to the creation of a Master in Museum Studies at the University of Alexandria.

Such a success has only been possible thanks to the strong engagement of our colleagues from Alexandria at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the Centre d'études alexandrines and the Faculty of Arts at the Alexandria University.

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Museum Education and Cultural Identity: A Counter-Terrorism Approach

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Abstract

During the past few years increasing threats to cultural heritage were induced by the acts of extremism performed by radical Islamists and fanatic groups. As a result, numerous heritage and archaeological sites were destroyed and hundreds of artefacts were stolen from archaeological museums in different countries in the Middle East. Egypt in particular has suffered gravely in that respect since 2011. However, the role of museums in Egypt in public education and raising awareness of the value and significance of cultural heritage has been quite limited. Hence, there is an obvious need for more active contribution through innovative museum outreach education programs. This could help reinforcing cultural identity and the sense of belonging among young generations in Egypt and hence function as a long term anti-extremism approach which would reflect on the protection and preservation of cultural heritage.

For decades, archaeology museums in Egypt were created and developed with the foreign visitors in mind. For obvious economic reasons, museums in Egypt are mostly considered as sources of revenue rather than public educational facilities. As a result, there is an evident separation between the local community in Egypt and the country's archaeology museums, which are rarely visited by the Egyptians themselves. On the other hand, archaeology museums in Egypt generally adopt classical methods of display, which relies almost entirely on the conventional exhibits of artefacts associated with information labels. The traditional nature of many Egyptian museums and the lack of attractive and informative displays contribute significantly to discouraging the public from visiting museums, and hence developing a sense of separation between the community and its cultural heritage. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the new museums that are currently being developed in Egypt, such as the Grand Egyptian Museum, would utilise more innovative and informative displays, which would attract more local visitors.

On the other hand, during the past few years, Egypt has witnessed serious political and social unrest, which had direct effects on the country's cultural heritage. One of the main features of that unstable period is religious extremism associated with acts of violence. That was evident in a number of incidents which included the vandalisms and theft of several exhibits in the Egyptian museum in February 2011, when 13 showcases were smashed, and more than 70 objects were damaged and about 80 others were stolen (El Saddik, 2013). Also the looting of the Malawi Museum in Upper Egypt in 2013, with more than 1000 objects stolen (UNESCO, 2013). Furthermore, numerous excavation sites and on-site storage facilities throughout the country were robbed. Moreover, in January 2015, as a result of bombing the building of the Cairo Police Headquarters, several parts of the nearby Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo were destroyed and a number of invaluable objects were damaged (UNESCO, 2014).

In addition to that more than 40 churches all over the country including a number of historic ones were deliberately set on fire by Islamic fanatics (BBC, 2013). Even contemporary works of Art in big cities were not exempted from damage and vandalism.

Islamic fanatics have even went much further when some of their leaders in 2012 requested the demolition of the Pyramids and the Sphinx considering them symbols of atheism and infidelity (CNN, 2012).

It became evident that one of the main reasons behind such fanatic and violent behaviour is the diminishing sense of belonging that such groups have to the country and to its culture and heritage, and hence the rejection of national identity and substituting it with ideological beliefs.

In fact, what happened in Egypt, in that respect, recalls several similar incidents in other countries. For example in 2001, the destruction of the 6th century AD Buddha statues by Taliban in Afghanistan (World Heritage 2003, 122), also the robbery of the archaeology museums in Syria and Iraq, and the recent destruction of statues and other artefacts of the Mosul Museum (UNESCO, 2015).

In fact, in different regions around the world, strong evidence is emerging to link terrorism with illegal antiquities trade (Dietzler, 2013), which has become a major revenue stream for terrorist activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and probably in Egypt. In fact, beside the artefacts destroyed by fanatic groups, many more are sold by them to fund their activities.

In Egypt, various security measures are being applied to deal with such problems, which include providing extra security on sites, museums, and churches, aiming to prevent acts of violence against cultural property. However, it is believed that the problem with extremism and violent acts against cultural property is more of an identity problem rather than a security one.

Different factors contribute to creating the cultural identity of any society (Clark, 2008). That includes heritage, social practices, language, ethics, ethnicity, religion and so on. Accordingly, cultural identity is a key factor in people's sense of belonging and how they conceive others and relate to them. It also helps breaking down barriers and building a sense of trust and security among members of the society.

Extremists and fanatics, on the other hand, have no sense of belonging to the country or to its heritage. So in fact the issue is not a simple one and the security solutions are not enough. And this is where museum education should step in and become an essential tool for establishing a link between the young generations and their county's heritage.

Museum education in Egypt

Several museums in Egypt have educational programs mainly dedicated to school children (Salah, 2013). In fact there is an entire demonstration within the Egyptian Ministry for Antiquities dedicated to museum education. However, there are two major issues concerning museum education programs in Egypt, which needs to be addressed in that respect.

The first one is concerned with the objectives behind such programs and the message they aim to deliver.

These programs in general aim to raise awareness and stimulate the interest of children in Egyptian history and culture. To do so, the programs offer different activities to school children such as workshops, painting, sculpting and so on.

However, for such programs to be effective tools, they should function within a national strategy that aims to create generations of moderate open-minded youth, and to reinforce their sense of belonging to this country and its heritage. This will play a key role in the future, not only in preserving our cultural heritage, but also in protecting young generations from the influence of fanatic groups. In doing so, there are several themes and topics that should be the focus of museum educational programs in Egypt. That includes for example:

- The Arabs and early Muslims' accounts of Egypt and their attitude towards Egyptian Antiquities when Egypt was conquered in the 7th century AD.
- The contribution of Medieval Arab scientists, scholars and researchers to different fields of knowledge.
- Early Christianity in Egypt and the Role of the Egyptian church in that respect.
- Egyptian folk tales and epics.
- The common ideas and concepts between different religions and beliefs such as the concepts of justice, equality, mercy and so on.

These are just few themes, however, there are plenty more which would help making museum education an influential and effective tool to achieve a strategic goal.

The second issue that should be addressed concerning museum education programs in Egypt is the fact that their activities are carried out almost exclusively within a museum premises. In other words, school children have to visit the museums to take part in such activities, which means that the majority of school children all over Egypt are deprived from that opportunity. With more than 18 million school students all over the country (SIS 2013), the number of children contributing to museum education programs is quite limited. On the other hand, the education system in Egypt, particularly in public schools, does not facilitate outings such as museum visits. The mass of students in classes, which exceed 50 pupils per class, makes it difficult to visit, let alone to benefit from museum education. Large groups of student visiting museums often result in frustration to museum staff and the lack of attention of the young visitors. Moreover, away from the big cities where museums are located, students in small towns and villages have almost no chance to benefit from museum education programs.

Accordingly, one solution for that is for the museums to go to schools rather than the other way. That could be done through innovative outreach schemes, which aim to provide programs, resources, and opportunities for students of different ages at their own schools. In many countries, museums and other organizations concerned with cultural heritage have outreach programs for schools and universities (HWT 2009, BM 2015, Louvre 2015). The aims of such programs are not only to carry out activities and have fun, but also to help school children understand and appreciate cultural heritage, its value and the ways to preserve it for the future. Applying similar outreach education programs in Egypt would be of a great value to relate what is taught at schools with the country's cultural heritage. They could include, hands on collections of real artefacts, presentations, activity books, workshops, competitions, storytelling, documentaries and so on. It could also include providing students with information about archaeological excavation and research, in an interesting and amusing way, which could be done as part of extra-curricular activities. This kind of education is very effective when it comes to teaching students about the dangers of looting and illegal trafficking of cultural material.

Obviously, those activities require full coordination between the antiquities and the education authorities so that museum professional and school teachers work together within a comprehensive national strategy.

Egypt does not lack the resources necessary to carry out such programs effectively. Actually there are plenty of resources that could be utilized for that purpose, except that it requires much broader dissemination and better coordination between stake holders.

For example, between 2010 and 2012 an EU funded project coordinated by the Technological Educational Institute of Athens in collaboration with a number of organizations including the Egyptian Museum produced an array of educational material for children about illicit trafficking of antiquities (WTP 2015). The resources included short films, lesson plans and activities workshops. Also there are several museums and NGOs around the world that develop resources which can be utilised of outreach museum education programs in Egypt. But most importantly, antiquities and education professionals should work together in the framework of a clear strategy in order to develop a national museum outreach program, designed with specific targets in mind. This could have a significant effect on future generations in Egypt. It could be an important tool in our endeavour to preserve the identity and integrity of this country.

Almost four decades ago de Varine-Bohan (1976) stated that “At the centre of this idea of a museum lie not things, but people”. Hence, it is time for the museums in Egypt to extend their role from displaying “things” to educating “people”.

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