

Tongue to Tongue – a collaborative exhibition

The history of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin is closely connected with the homonymous university department, whose origins date back to 1923. Its collections are organised into Primatological, Pale ethnologic and Ethnographic sections. Although the museum has been closed to the public since 1984, it pursues its scientific activity through temporary exhibitions, conferences, seminars and educational workshops.

The Centre for African Studies (CSA) was established in 1983 with a view to fostering cultural relations between Piedmont and Africa, and promoting the knowledge of African history, cultures, languages and arts. In 1996, it launched a project whose main goal is to enhance the African artistic and ethnographic heritage preserved in regional museums.

Process

Tongue to Tongue – a collaborative exhibition was entirely based on a participatory planning process. The “tongue” of the museum (institutional, scientific, didactic) engaged in a dialogue with the mediators’ “tongue” (autobiographical, evocative, emotional), hence the title of the exhibition, from the original title of a song by the group Radiodervish.

At the heart of the project was a training course for Cultural Mediators of Intercultural Heritages, primarily conceived as a process of cultural empowerment. Trained mediators, recognised as “new interpreters” of the museum’s heritage, were in fact involved in the planning and mounting of a multi-vocal exhibition, in close cooperation with the museum staff and an architect / exhibition planner.

Each mediator was free to choose from the ethnographic collections the objects with which they identified culturally and/or emotionally: objects not necessarily directly related to his/her own cultural background, but holding a particular significance as they revealed sometimes unexpected links with the mediator’s personal history, or with his/her expertise and memories.

The selection of objects from the collection was followed by the planning of “narrative routes,” in which the museum staff also took part. Finally, the objects were displayed in showcases alongside the “subjective heritage” of the mediators (including souvenirs, pictures, books and clothes), thereby creating an impressive range of autobiographical installations.

The exhibition was open to the public upon request from mid-November 2008 to the end of January 2009. The visit consisted of dialogical narrative routes, resulting from the interaction and exchange of knowledge and perspectives between a museum educator and a mediator. Preparatory activities were planned for secondary schools.

Outcomes

The key strengths of the project may be described as follows:

- Participatory planning resulted not only in the development of narrative routes (interpretation), but also in the inclusion of mediators’ voices in display;
- Storytelling was conceived as a mediation tool ‘not so much from a linguistic point of view, as in order to share both individual and institutional knowledge and

perspectives, create and / or consolidate the “social value” of the museum for its audiences, and promote the cultural citizenship of migrant communities;’

- The autobiographical approach allowed mediators to incorporate their individual (and migratory) stories in the exhibition spaces and displayed objects;
- The architect took part in all the planning phases, thereby playing the threefold role of exhibition designer, facilitator and “translator” of the mediators’ knowledge and expertise.

Some critical points also emerged:

- The actual opportunity for trained mediators to be involved in future heritage education projects in an intercultural perspective;
- The evaluation of the project’s educational impact on participating schools after the visit was not envisaged.

Impact on the museum and future perspectives:

- Participation in the project strengthened the museum’s expertise in education and intercultural research;
- The re-contextualisation of collections emphasised the evocative and emotional power of objects, thereby disengaging them from the prevailing rationale of “cultural representation;”
- The museum staff developed new skills through participatory planning – which allowed a bi-directional exchange of professional competencies – and the reinterpretation of ethnographical collections from an intercultural perspective;
- On the other hand, the legacy of the project is significantly limited by the current location of the museum (open only upon request) and the lack of resources; one of the short to medium term objectives is to further develop staff training initiatives, also through seminars and conferences.

Institutions

Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin

www.museounito.it/antropologia/

Centre for African Studies

www.csapiemonte.it

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Target groups

- For the training course: a group of cultural mediators from Chad, Italy, Morocco, Congo, Romania and Senegal; education staff of the museum
- For the exhibition: local students attending the last two years of secondary school, general public and non-visitors (e.g. youths, immigrant communities)