

Knowing about their cultures; knowing about our culture

The Museum of Pre-Columbian Art Felipe Orlando, Benalmádena (Malaga), was founded in 1970 and re-opened in 2005 after major renovation. Its collections are organised in an Archaeological section (with local findings) and a Pre-Columbian section (with artefacts from Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Costa Rica and Peru).

In recent years Benalmádena experienced a significant growth, which has turned it into a city. While its historic centre continues to be a small nucleus, its physiognomy and people have gradually changed, partly to adapt to the arrival of new residents from different parts of the world. These may be differentiated by native language, on the one hand Spanish-speaking immigrants mostly coming from Latin American countries, on the other people from Europe or the US (whether buying a holiday home or moving permanently to Benalmádena).

While relationships are generally good between established families and newcomers, there are concerns that traditions from all groups may be lost. It is here that the Museum has intervened: one of its aims is to produce an exchange of knowledge presenting traditions of other places, as well as local ones, in order to help people from abroad learn about the customs of the municipality and vice versa.

Objectives

- To encourage the participation of the local community and of groups of foreigners in the activities of the Museum, and to support these new visitors to become regular museum-goers through presenting traditions of three world celebrations;
- To promote the relationship and the exchange of ideas between the native and foreign communities;
- To create an archive in the Museum with testimonies of the municipality's traditions, and to value the contribution of museum visitors to this archive.

Process

The Museum of Pre-Columbian Art carried out a series of activities around three principal Christian festivals celebrated in Benalmádena and around the world: The Day of the Dead, Christmas and the Holy Week. In order to explore each one of these traditions, the Museum created a programme including an exhibition, a reminiscence workshop and the tasting of traditional foods:

- The exhibitions consisted in the installation of a Mexican altar in the festivity of the dead (held during October – November 2008), a Mexican Bethlehem with a *piñata* to celebrate Christmas (December – January 2009), and exhibitions of films and sacred artefacts related to the celebration of the Holy Week within the municipality (March – April 2009);
- In addition to the exhibitions, local audiences and groups of foreigners were invited to attend informal evening gatherings where participants would offer recollections and experiences of these traditions according to their place of origin, in order to understand how the three festivities are celebrated in different parts of the world. The testimonials will form part of an archive within the Museum;
- Participants also shared in a snack with typical sweets, thus facilitating the collection of recipes from around the world on the occasion of these three celebrations, which will result in the publication of a book.

The key target groups for the project were elderly people from the local community and individuals with an immigrant background, inclined to talk about the three festivals from a personal perspective.

Outcomes

The evaluation of participants' experience of the activities was carried out through verbal feedback and interviews. The response was largely positive and participants have encouraged the Museum to repeat these activities in the future. Being part of the project helped people to feel valued, since their testimonies and experiences will now form part of a permanent heritage archive within the Museum.

On the other hand, one key weakness of the project has been the low level of participation on the part of foreigners. This was due in part to the little interest shown in the three festivities explored (in particular by residents from the US and the UK), and to the linguistic barriers hindering interaction with the local community. In this respect, the active participation of individuals of Latin American origin was facilitated by the use of a common language.

While there is always room for improvement, the Museum has found this relatively small-scale activity, which encourages citizen participation, to be an excellent asset. With minimum costs and a strong commitment by Museum staff, favourable results and a high user acceptance have been achieved. Remaining tasks are to continue the collaboration with groups of foreigners, consulates and immigrant associations, and also to find a way of encouraging the participation of younger people, who were under-represented in the pilot project.

Institution

Museo de Arte Precolombino Felipe Orlando de Benalmádena
<http://www.benalmadena.com/museo/index.htm>

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Target groups

General public of Benalmádena – both established residents and recent immigrants