

# Museums and intercultural dialogue: the state of the art in Europe



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dialogue and European museums"  
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## Museums and the promotion of intercultural dialogue: policy approaches across Europe

- “showcasing difference”: a knowledge-oriented multiculturalism intended as an educational strategy to promote in autochthonous audiences a better understanding of “other” cultures
- “integration” of new citizens within mainstream culture, to help them become more familiar with a country’s history, language, values and traditions
- promotion of cultural self-awareness in migrant communities through “culturally specific programming”

**source:** S. Bodo (2008), «From “heritage education with intercultural goals” to “intercultural heritage education”: conceptual framework and policy approaches in museums across Europe», in ERICarts Institute (ed.), *Sharing Diversity. National approaches to intercultural dialogue in Europe* ([www.interculturaldialogue.eu](http://www.interculturaldialogue.eu))



## A new challenge for museums...

«To work towards a more integrative model of diversity, rather than the current model with its tendency to reify difference and put people into discrete categories without interaction or overlap»

**source:** L. Young (2005), *Our lives, our histories, our collections*, paper commissioned by the Museum of London to initiate the project "Reassessing what we collect"  
([www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/RWWC/Essays/Essay2](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/RWWC/Essays/Essay2))



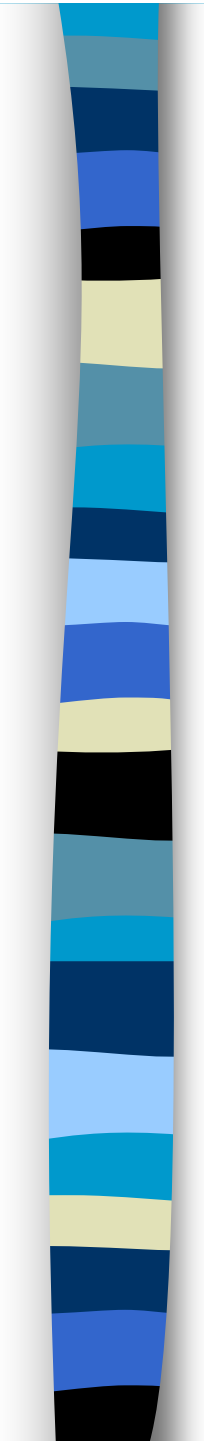
## Is carrying out intercultural work about...

- enhancing the “literacy” of immigrant individuals and groups in a country’s history, art and culture
- “compensating” their past misrepresentation in museums
- promoting their cultural self-awareness
- or is it rather a bi-directional process which is dialogical and transformative on both sides, and in which all are equal participants?



## Exploring issues of diversity and interculturality in museums

- “From the Margins to the Core?” (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 24-26 March 2010)  
([http://www.vam.ac.uk/res\\_cons/research/conferences/margins\\_to\\_core/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/research/conferences/margins_to_core/index.html))
- “Migration in museums – Narratives of Diversity in Europe” (Berlin, 23-25 October 2008)
- European Intercultural Campus 2008, roundtable “Intercultural dialogue in metropolises – theory and practices” (Warsaw, 12-13 September 2008)
- “Museums and refugees. Keeping cultures” (London, Museum in Docklands, 13-14 March 2008)



«The policy of targeting individuals and groups according to BME categories was adopted in order to produce positive cultural change..., but structurally, it reproduces racialised thinking. Whilst the intentions that lie behind targeting strategies reflect a democratic impulse – equality in access and participation – the outcomes and effects are limiting precisely because the category reproduces the division between BME and everything that it is not. [...] **There is no coming together here, no new mingling of cultures, nothing of the social and cultural body is transformed**»

**source:** A. Dewdney (2010), *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture*, presentation at the V&A conference "From the Margins to the Core?"



## A question of methodology (1)

“Intercultural” projects in museums are **not primarily about transmitting content (the “other” as an object of knowledge), but first and foremost about developing relational skills and dialogic identities** (e.g. cognitive mobility, the ability to question one’s own points of view, the awareness of one’s own multiple identities, an openness to individuals and groups with different cultural, ethnic, religious backgrounds), for example by:

- encouraging re-negotiated interpretations, active engagement with objects, mutually supportive learning
- promoting emotional and sensory access
- providing opportunities for self-representation
- challenging stereotypes
- using a plurality of sources, communication styles, community engagement skills...



## A question of methodology (2)

- is the use of a **thematic approach** to collections intended as an alternative way of transmitting content / specialist knowledge, or is it aimed at «helping participants develop a critical understanding of the reality surrounding them, and increasing their ability to analyse and communicate their own experience of the world»?
- is autobiographical **storytelling** encouraged as a one-off chance for self-expression, or is it intended as an opportunity to start a reflection on the role of the museum and to lay down foundations for continued dialogue and cooperation?
- is the **evocative and emotional power of objects** emphasised to strengthen group allegiances or to disengage objects and audiences from the prevailing rationale of “cultural representation”?

**source:** S. Bodo (2009), “Introduction to pilot projects”, in S. Bodo, K. Gibbs, M. Sani (eds.), *Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue: selected practices from Europe*, published by MAP for ID partners ([http://www.mapforid.it/Handbook\\_MAPforID\\_EN.pdf](http://www.mapforid.it/Handbook_MAPforID_EN.pdf))



## Underlying policy models

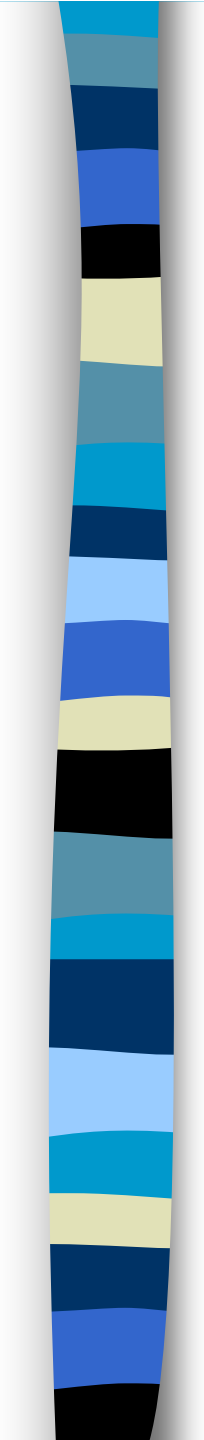
- the “**welfare model**” is characterised by a dichotomy between “core” (conservation, curatorship, permanent exhibitions) and “margins” (education, temporary exhibitions, outreach and community projects)
- in the “**social justice model**” the dichotomy is broken, communities are engaged as actors, creators, producers and decision-makers, and museums provide a precious resource for the renegotiation of identities

**source:** Mark O’Neill (2010), Head of Art and Museums at the Glasgow City Council, presentation at the V&A conference “From the Margins to the Core?”



## Further challenges for museum practice

- ensuring that the outcome of programmes and activities aimed at promoting cross-cultural interaction between different audiences is clearly visible and easily retrievable – e.g. in the collections documentation system, permanent displays, temporary exhibitions
- rethinking all the fundamental functions of a museum (from collections management and conservation to exhibition strategies) in an intercultural perspective, so that this is built into its institutional fabric



«Achieving interculturality is a step by step process that may help, with every project and every action, to not only transform our societies, but also our museums and the nature of public culture»

**source:** C. Kreps (2009), Foreword to MAP for ID final publication