

In the space of new media, where non-linear, individual navigation defines each and every user's interactivity with the site, the complexity of the traditional museum is sometimes ignored. The seminar acted as a sort of 'laying the cards on the table' for museums and probably raised more questions than it

answered. It demonstrated that we (museum professionals, designers, academics) need to be more critical about locating new media within the museum program.

The use of advanced software does not automatically lead to interesting, educative and entertaining displays; only

through thoughtful and creative translation by curators and designers can we develop clearer impetus for using new media to deliver museum content.

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## COMMENT

# Ancient Cultures — New Worlds. Really?

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I have never seen Euro-centrism expressed so astonishingly or so clearly as at the recent ICOM conference in Melbourne. Here in Melbourne, despite at least fifteen years of public debate, ICOM managed to confirm that the centre of the world IS elsewhere. I'd seen it at previous Museums Australia conferences, where little attempt was made to communicate in a serious way with people of our region, and I assumed it was 'because of the non-art museums' 'local' agenda. But this was an international conference, a real chance to say something about our region as an interesting, intelligent, self-possessed part of the world.

My remarks are made as a delegate only — I'm not privy to internal discussions on this issue, and perhaps those who were may care to answer this piece.

I have a litmus test for Australians I meet, which is based on their attitude to 'Asia': they don't have to 'do' anything about 'Asia', but they do have to acknowledge its relevance and importance to us. (Young people almost all do, and the older ones split!) From the beginning of the ICOM planning process I was interested to see how this manifested itself. Quite early on, I was asked my opinion about involving people from Asia. And my answer was that it seemed to me a fantastic opportunity to bring a whole new group of people in, and to place Australia as a relevant and central place for discussions about museums on an international level. But to do this required real commitment, time, effort and inclusion. That people from Asia had to be included in the planning, in the intellectual decisions about topics and in the high profile speakers' lists. Real commitment had to be made to find out ways to encourage delegates from there.

(My one proactive offer, working with a group of colleagues who had toured together in Japan, was to compile a list of Japanese senior art museum personnel as potential speakers. The hierarchy of Japanese museums seems to insist that the directors must be asked before their peers and staff can start to think of attending.)

And what did happen? In practical terms, of the 1,300 delegates listed, only 53 were from Asia, and I counted only five from Japan (none from a leading museum — the one listed Japanese speaker, who in the end did not come, is an independent curator/consultant). As a note to those thinking the economic crisis in Asia would preclude delegates, certainly it is an issue, but there is funding in Asia for such things. Bodies like ASEAN Council for Culture and Information, with enough warning, can support applications for conference visitors, as can other funding organisations in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

In the intellectual content of the conference, there was no important agenda about Asia anywhere. This was such an irony with the title being 'Ancient Cultures — New Worlds'. Here we were so well placed in Australia to really discuss this grand issue with our Asian neighbours (half the world's population, remember), so far from Europe and the hegemony of the USA.

If a serious approach had been taken with the concept offered in the conference title, the old worlds of Asia adding their different responses to dealing with contemporary issues would have taken the discussion in challenging, different directions. It could have created different access points to this cosy ICOM world.

But the old order continued unchallenged. I made one note when Rudi Fuchs was speaking about cultural universals, saying we 'all' acknowledged that Greek art was central to us, to wonder what the two Korean guests in the audience were thinking.

The languages of ICOM are so obviously those of colonisation: Spanish, French and English. For museums to perpetuate this, even to celebrate it, when they should be leaders of critical, self-conscious assessment of the presentation of 'cultural material', seemed even more ironic in terms of the conference title and for museum culture generally at the beginning of the 21st century.

It seemed a further irony that the one speaker from Asia, Marion Pastor Roces, in a way confirmed the Euro-centredness of the conference. Her piece was based on a critique of the West where works from, say, the Philippines were displayed without appropriate context. She quoted Euro-American writers and artists to support her case.

I would have been much more comfortable if she had included examples of how it was being done well in the Philippines — as Emmanuel Kasarhérou did in speaking about what they were doing at the new museum in Noumea.<sup>1</sup> The experience of the people from the Pacific — from Noumea and Vanuatu — were for me the only breath of air around.

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### Reference

- 1 Kasarhérou, Emmanuel, 1998, 'Ancient Cultures New Worlds in the Pacific', *Museum National*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp 4–6.