

UNIVERSAL MUSEUM - UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE?**PNINA ROSENBERG****Art Historian - Curator****The National Maritime Museum, Haifa, Israel**

Marshal McLuhan's prophetic vision of the global village is about to be realized. If we are aware of the fact that mass communication reduces the dimensions of our world and makes it more unified and universal, we should take this into consideration when planning the Universal Museum and the language that should be used in it.

As curators, educators and museum staff we should not ignore the fact that the spectator/viewer is drawn to the exhibits not only by their own merit, but also guided and assisted by verbal messages, i. e. Labels, brochures. Catalogues etc. Hence, the crucial question is what we, the museologists, use as a means of communication when preparing for a Universal Museum. Should we use pictorial semiotics? This may be a partial solution, which is mainly restricted to objects that can be manipulated and moved by the visitor, as is the case in most of the technological museums. But since the range of objects on display at museums is vast and varied - fine art, archaeological finds, ethnographic objects etc., it may not be the answer to the whole spectrum of exhibits.

Dr. Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, being an optimist, hoped that by introducing Esperanto to the multi-lingual world population, humanity would be able to bridge and diminish the gap of linguistic differences, thus creating a better understanding between the international communities. Unfortunately this vision was not realized. Esperanto was and still is an utopian and esoteric phenomenon. The barriers between nations still exist although, as mentioned earlier, mass media do help, in some ways, to reduce them.

Let us return, for a moment, to our early prehistoric roots. It is a well-known fact that man painted before he invented writing; while pictorial signs such as hieroglyphics, were usually an intermediate

stage in many cultures. Today, even after so many thousands of years, we understand and appreciate the ancient oeuvres; we are impressed by the Lascaux cave paintings and overwhelmed by the grandeur and sublimity of the monumental pyramids, even without a single word of explanation. The conclusion implicit in this is that art was a means of universal communication long before writing was introduced, and so it still is, as I will try to demonstrate.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Japanese art was introduced to the Parisian public, and although its novel use of iconography and compositional devices were “unheard of” before, it was rapidly accepted by the French people and the local artistic milieu. The artistic language, though unfamiliar to the Western world, created a strong bond with the viewers, in spite or because of its novelty. A cultural bridge between East and West was formed, despite the impossibility of verbal communication.

Having been for many years a curator of Japanese art in an Israeli museum, I was personally confronted with the same phenomenon, though on a smaller scale. In spite of the unfamiliar codes that Japanese art revealed to the Israeli public, local people did appreciate and understand this strange art, even without verbal aids, because it appealed to and fascinated the visitors even when they first encountered it. Of course, once the breakthrough had been made, we could impart to the public a wider and deeper knowledge and understanding. It is my opinion that this lesson is relevant to our current topic. Art has its universal vocabulary and we should try to define and employ it while “designing” the Universal Museum.

Nowadays people are exposed to a great variety of cultures, aesthetics and phenomena, largely via television - which has both visual and auditory attractions. The Universal Museum should “borrow” some of those devices and use them to achieve its goals. It is not the common use of audio-visual aids which accompany so many displays to which I refer. I think that we should “translate” and transfer the media’s methods to our highlighted differently; the spectator’s eye and mind can be guided according to our intention;

objects can be explained and emphasized by means of juxtaposition, and the message can be delivered, by appealing to the universal qualities of mankind.

Curators and exhibition designers should plan and prepare carefully. Abstract art, which is usually considered as difficult to exhibit without an accompanying scholarly text, can be self-explanatory if mounted correctly. The curator can, for example, display a sequence of works of art - e. g. from **Piet Mondrian**'s almost figurative *Red Tree* (1909-10), through the *Trees Compositions* (1912) to his later geometric compositions, thus demonstrating the process and the modifications the artist and the paintings have undergone towards abstraction, without recourse to verbal reinforcement. This message could be emphasized by video recordings, sophisticated computer programs and so forth, where the only limits are those of the imagination and the budget.

The museologist must not be intimidated by or disdain these technical achievements - television, video and computers, particularly the latter, which are rapidly advancing beyond the bounds of visions (virtual reality), but should use them wisely in the context of the museum.

Let us turn for a moment to music. Most people understand and respond to music they are more or less at tuned to, though Western people will find it difficult to listen to Eastern music and vice versa. Nonetheless, it is a very common means of communication. Is it because of its non-verbal character? Without doubt the language of music crosses borders more easily than speech, but still it is a language which has its own codes and rules. Music is usually considered a more abstract form of art, appealing not only to the ear but also to the imagination, but does not visual art also appeal to our intellect and imagination, our inner self, as well as to our eye?

I assume that while reflecting on and considering the language of the Universal Museum we should bear in mind various components; the great appeal ancient cultures, objects, and music have on us even without the assistance of verbal "guides"; advanced technology, which

creates new aspects and dimensions easily comprehend and employed by the younger generation, the potential visitors to our Universal Museum. We should internalize these various factors and implement them in our present and future museums, not only to make them more accessible to a wider public, but also to convey our messages regardless of the visitor's origin.

I am not suggesting that we should standardize all the museums so that "you've seen one, you've seen all". On the contrary, each museum should preserve its own identity and uniqueness, the only change in the Universal Museum being its mode of communication with the public. We do not need an esoteric "shrine" that creates a dialogue with a small number of scholars, nor an artificial, synthetic and "stylized" venue, but a dynamic environment that appeals to a great many people of various nations, cultures and languages.

If we are destined to live in "one village" let us take what is best from it and create a better, a more comprehensible and universal dwelling for our muses.

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Publications (selected list)

various publications including exhibition catalogues and articles on art and museology such as:

Art

Kabuki Theater, The Museum of Japanese Art, Haifa, spring, 1983

Japanese Prints, Landscapes and Views, The Museum of Japanese Art, Haifa, spring, 1984

The World of Tetsuya Noda, Printmaker's Diary, The Museum of Japanese Art, Haifa, summer, 1984

"Tokyo-Paris-Tokyo; An Intercultural Dialogue," *Studio*, 24, Tel Aviv, July-August 1991, pp. 8-9 (Hebrew)

Museology

"The Language of the Exhibition," basic papers submitted to the ICOM Symposium The Language of Exhibitions, Vevey, October, 1991, *ICOFOM Study Series*, 19, pp. 93-97

"The Exhibit as a Spatial Organization," to be published in a special issue of *Museum International* (end of 1994/yearly 1995), Unesco, Paris

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