

## THE CRISIS OF HISTORY MUSEUMS

### Dr. Luis Gerardo Morales Moreno - Mexico

---

The idea is to inform non specialized audiences in the most accessible manner possible about the general status of museums and history; of museographic and historiographic representation. Above all it is necessary to understand the specificity of the history museum with respect to others such as art, science or ethnology museums. Currently, history museums in Mexico are going through a crisis of their representation paradigm and of cultural practices which is worth analyzing. In this regard, I wish to propose at least four thematic pillars.

Firstly, let us consider that history museums represent historiography, that is, not only the events that happened but also the narratives and communicational practices (rites, objectivized grammar, scenarios). The museum overall, besides transmitting scientific and aesthetic models, operates as a space of sociability. In the case of history museums, as has happened from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in several Latin American museums of a historical/archeological nature, the *transmission of knowledge* on the past goes side by side with communicational practices such as those of the schools or the civic-political rituals. The processes for shaping national states turned history museums into spaces for building modern sociabilities such as those of scholarly citizens, together with the symbols of unity of the State. A similar process took place in the national museums of Washington, London, Paris or Berlin which recreated in their collective relics, patriotic (and imperial) images and turned history museums into identity temples. It is still to be proven whether in post-colonial societies it is viable to think of a post-national representation paradigm.

A second pillar proposes the different forms of narration of historiographic writings with regard to museography. The linear nature and abstraction of the traces of writing have no relationship with the corporeal nature of museographic objects. The reading of museographic collections takes place in a fragmented and targeted space. It seems to be an objectivized grammar because its narration is also made up of a beginning, middle and end. The fragmentation of museographic space, however, turns narrations into discontinuous threads, and the significant of the museographic object cannot be boiled down to an accurate meaning. This is only obtained through cultural and educational referrals which make sense out of any museographic exhibition. The study of history museums calls for referentiality theories. Consequently, guided visits, audio visits, information brochures and all those tools that help to better develop the narrative programs of exhibitions tend to qualitatively improve museographic messages. Far from imposing silence, history museums require the reinstatement of orality.

Thirdly, a history museum, unlike a history book, cannot be re-written several times in order to offer new data on the prevailing modes of *thinking and observing* history at different times. The updating of the different museographic versions is not carried out as expeditiously as in literature. If there is a long-standing historic museography in Mexico, for instance, it is that which is still based on historiographic and pedagogical notions from the liberal and positivist world of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the old National Museum to the current National History Museum in its different museographic versions of 1945, 1982 or 2005, the past in Mexico is still represented under an empiristic reference framework. The idea is to “re-think” what we should do to understand “the permanent and the temporary” in history showrooms since the gap between contemporary historiography and history museums is becoming broader and more insurmountable.

Our fourth theoretical pillar resorts to the museums' capacity to "freeze" images we have left and correlate them to discourses and symbolic practices that these objects have been linked to throughout time. In brief, historical museographic representation makes it possible to note the reproductive nature of ideological hegemonies. The powerful effect of the symbolic unity recreated by historical museographies continues to reveal the ironies and contradictions of the contemporary world. In this regard, it is necessary to reflect on the spaces of subalternity in history and their viability in hegemonic representations. Topics such as women, marginalization, homosexuality, ethnic minorities, migrations, etc. call for a more urgent reflection in historical museographies.

In this regard, the issue of the museographic representation of history is very current because, in the six year period 2000-2006, within the Mexican context there have been legal attempts to modify the State's cultural-corporate machinery. At the same time, the trade unions of that bureaucratic machinery "froze" -like at the Wax Museum- forms of perpetuating labor and ideological sovereignty on the historical past of Mexico. Government legislative proposals have not been convincing and do not meet the standards of the debate which is not only political or legal but also intellectual. The best example of the sclerosis affecting the educational corporate system (the Secretariat of Public Education and the public universities) can be seen within history museums which have been turned into stamp albums, with pedagogical modalities dating 50 years back and with no possibility of undergoing any technical or professional renewal.

On the other hand, the school system has turned history into a teacher of life, a grumpy and boring one. The divorce between history museums and history institutions, between museums and academic and professional organizations turned the historical-archeological genre into a sort of single system mummified representation. The crisis of history museums, given their didactic and intellectual lag, must be urgently addressed by professional and specialized organizations, as well as through more progressive educational policies.

*Traducción al inglés: Yvonne Fisher*