

Introduction

PIET DE GRYSE

Ladies and gentlemen,

it is my pleasure to welcome you all here in Graz for this thirty second ICOMAM symposium.¹ In 1957, our predecessor, IAMAM, started what has since become a tradition. IAMAM indeed became an official International Committee of ICOM in 2003 and changed its name; the newly constituted ICOMAM perpetuated the tradition. Not bad, for an organization run exclusively by volunteers and representing a network rather than an actual institution! Thirty two congresses, no less: I am so free as to draw your attention to the implications of that figure. It indicates that our association has withstood the test of time, that it has now definitely come of age and that it undoubtedly acquired experience. These thirty two international meetings have, in most cases, led to full-blown publications providing written accounts of the various lectures and papers; some of these proceedings are still available. For the newcomers amongst you I would like to point out that ICOMAM's fiftieth anniversary in 2007 was, amongst other things, celebrated with a rerun of the most successful contributions in a rather luxurious publication.²

The importance of these very accessible meetings in our specific field of interest – military and arms history and museology - cannot be stressed enough. They create close links between institutions and between participants, sometimes even evolving into long and warm friendships. The networking facilities provided by these symposiums also have to be taken into account. The primary aim of these conferences is and remains the exchange of research results, the confrontation of ideas and the critical evaluation of what our colleagues are currently working on. With this in mind, these conferences simply have to reach out to and specifically address young researchers, young museum professionals and young academics. Those at the beginning of their

1 | Until 1999 IAMAM organised only triennial meetings, called Congresses, since then the policy has changed and also annual conferences have been introduced. Taking them all together we come up with a total of thirty two conferences and congresses.

2 | ICOMAM 50 (2007): Papers on arms and military history 1957–2007. Edited by R. Smith, Leeds: Basiliscoe Press.

careers often possess a knack for evaluating and approaching our sector with greater open-mindedness and candour. I feel that we should reflect upon ways to motivate young researchers and small institutions to participate in our meetings, especially in these times of financial hardship and budgetary restrictions.

The fact that we assemble in Graz this year is linked to the celebration of another respectable and important jubilee. In 1811, that is to say, 200 years ago, Archduke Johann of Austria, brother of Austrian Emperor Franz I, founded, in collaboration with the Styrian estates, the Styrian State Museum Joanneum here in this town. He saw this as an “inner Austrian national museum” with an extremely varied collection encompassing art, nature, industry, technology and practically all of human activity. The museum was to “bring these things to life so it would make learning easier and stimulate a thirst for knowledge”³. After several reorganizations, the Universalmuseum Joanneum grew into the largest of its kind in Central Europe, housing more than 4.5 million objects covering the fields of natural history, art, technology and folk culture. The Landeszeughaus, the famous Graz armoury, well known to all weapons historians for its extraordinary collection presented in an exceptional setting, is, of course, older than the Joanneum. The armoury dates back to the middle of the 17th century, when it was constructed to defend the borders against Turkish attacks. However, by the middle of the 19th century, the armoury was incorporated into the Joanneum and thus also plays an active role in the activities organized for this quite festive year.

On behalf of all those present here today and on behalf of the entire ICOMAM family, I would like to congratulate the organizers and especially director Dr. Muchitsch and his team on this special anniversary and this remarkable event. Moreover, I would like to thank him most heartily for presenting ICOMAM with the opportunity of joining in the celebrations organized for this bicentennial. It is both an honour and a pleasure to learn that this conference is on the list of official activities set up by the Joanneum. It is also an honour and a pleasure to spend a few days in this lovely and friendly Graz, to take time to discuss and debate and to discover the many faces of the Joanneum, with the Landeszeughaus as a magnet for all those interested in old weapons and armour. Thank you.

The global theme for this meeting is certainly both inspiring and intriguing. “Does war belong in museums?” It is an open-ended question with a strong philosophical undercurrent, but the subtitle “the representation of violence in exhibitions” definitely paves part of the way. ICOMAM has already taken an interest in exhibition arts and techniques on several occasions in the past, but then tended to focus more specifically on technical matters or actual internal and external transformation processes encountered when refurbishing old museum galleries or old-fashioned presentations. There is one notable exception, although that workshop cannot really be

3 | Quoted from the website of the Universalmuseum Joanneum: <http://www.museum-joanneum.at/en/joanneum/about-the-joanneum>

categorized as a pure IAMAM/ICOMAM activity. Indeed, when the former Director of the Legermuseum in Delft, Jan Buijse, retired in 2002, his museum organised a small symposium with the intriguing title “Presenting the Unpresentable. Renewed Presentations in Museums of Military History”. The Legermuseum wanted to open a reflection and a debate on how to think about and deal with the processes of rebuilding and renewing old-fashioned military museums. The Legermuseum therefore invited six directors and staff members of international military museums who had already gone through renewal. Some fundamental and critical questions were put forward. Is there still a need for military museums? What about and how to present the “darker” pages in our national (military) history? How to incorporate more history into military museums?⁴ The last question obviously illustrated the (frustrating?) fact that a lot of these old-fashioned military museums were pure object-museums in which war was often reduced to a pure “Materialschlacht” without any human interaction or activity. We will learn more about this soon, as it is the topic of a lecture questioning and explaining how a military museum had for many years been able to speak about war while keeping war completely out of the museum, not in spite of the objects shown, but actually because of them.

The theme of the present conference probes much deeper and is more up to date than ever. What about the phenomenon of war in arms and armour museums and other military museums? How do we deal with violence, with conflict? What about the aggression and exploitation so often linked to war? How can we present an atrocity such as war in an acceptable way and in what kind of a setting, and finally in what kind of museum?⁵ For people who have gone through a war, the experience proves extremely traumatic and painful. It has left ineradicable scars. Therefore, war is considered as something to be avoided at all costs, as it invariably leads to human drama, economic upheaval (we will not consider the armament industry) and social

4 | Presenting the Unpresentable. Renewed Presentations in Museums of Military History, Delft: Legermuseum, 2002. The six speakers were L. Milner of the Imperial War Museum (London), P. Lefèvre of the Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History (Brussels), T. Scheerer of the German Army Museum (Dresden), J. Engström of the Army Museum (Stockholm), P. Sigmond of the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) and G. Wilson of the Royal Armouries (Leeds).

5 | It is not the first time that a reflection on violence in museums has taken place. By way of example: C. Creig Crysler (2006): »Violence and Empathy: National Museums and the Spectacle of Society«, in: *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol. XVII, no. II, pp. 19–38. In his article the author compares the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. with the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa and the new World Trade Center Memorial Museum in New York. While dealing with different historical contexts, these institutions seek to embody models of tolerant national citizenship in their visitors by immersing them in narratives of collective violence, death and ultimately, national rebirth.

regression. War is synonymous with death, poverty and destruction. But war also gives people the opportunity to rise above themselves. Sacrifice, courage and heroism are also an integral part of the story of war. This makes me say that yes, war indeed has its place in a museum. There is of course no single right and final answer on how to present violence and war in museums. The museums and the collections we represent are so diverse as are our origin, history and mission statements.⁶

The representation of violence and war situations in showcases and dioramas nevertheless remains extremely risky. The various informative and explanatory texts make clear that there is an unbridgeable gap between the *real* past and the *reconstructed* past as it is presented in a museum. Time and again it becomes apparent that it is extremely difficult to reconcile past and present. Rendering the past is and always will be ambivalent. One only has to consider the dangers inherent in the aesthetic presentation of war, and, by extension, of the past. Bringing *war to life* in a museum (even this can be interpreted in various ways) implies striking a fragile balance between aesthetics and historically accurate representations. No one will blame a curator for selecting an aesthetically pleasing set-up. Of course, the curator wants a nice and attractive place - but the visitor might very well start confusing the aestheticism of the display with an inaccurate view of the past. Aesthetics can lead to wrong conclusions. A fiercely business-like approach (that is, one presenting weapons as purely utilitarian or technical objects, or one that looks at them through the eyes of an engineer) can, however, also lead to these false conclusions. In that way, a streamlined technical presentation can erase the feelings of the past and its sensations, a situation much too common in military museums.

However, and this is perhaps comforting, military museums are not the only ones faced with this double-edged situation. A few years ago, the sociologist of arts and culture, Pascal Gielen, wrote a very interesting book about the presentation, the dangers and the pitfalls of cultural heritage.⁷ The book neatly ties in with our central theme today. Through different examples, the author demonstrates the dangers of museum displays steeped in nostalgia. Folklore museums are particularly prone to this danger, although museums concerned with agriculture, industrial and economic activities or ethnography are also more or less confronted with the same issue. We all have to avoid over-simplified presentations, because these invariably lead to an overly romanticized image of the past. Gielen cites the example of the representation of a late 19th century schoolroom with its blackboard and children quietly sitting

6 | See also C. Mardini, What kind of museum for the city of Beirut? s.l.n.d.

7 | Pascal Gielen (2007): *De Onbereikbare Binnenkant van het Verleden. Over de Ensencering van het Culturele Erfgoed*. Leuven: Lannoo Campus. P. Gielen (1970) is the director of the research center "Arts in Society" at the Groningen University where he is an associate professor of the sociology of art. He also leads the research group and book series 'Arts in Society' (Fontys College for the Arts, Tilburg). Gielen has written several books on contemporary art, cultural heritage and cultural politics.

on their benches. This scene could easily lead visitors to believe that life at that time used to be simple and peaceful and could make them forget that that same era was characterized by widespread child labour where learning and going to school were reserved for the happy few, to the economically and sociologically better-off classes. The example shows the dangers of an involuntary romanticizing of the past through museum displays. Museum presentations have to strike a careful balance: the less enjoyable sides of history also have to be put on display, even if this disturbs the romantic and nostalgic images some people love to cultivate. I would like to refer to Pascal Gielen one last time: He also talks about the “unattainable inside of the past”, and especially about how difficult it is to touch the soul of the past in museum presentations. Even re-enactment, which, when it is done well, confronts us with a real-life experience, runs the risk of excessive nostalgia and aestheticism, thus losing touch with the past. This highlights an interesting paradox inherent to each and every well-established museum set-up. An accurate historic framework referring to basic facts, with historic and social contextualisation, is of the essence if only to put the presentation in perspective and to stress that a museum presentation will always be and remain an interpretation. It will always be a contemporary view of the past, a few steps removed from true facts and actual history.

I will limit myself to these few observations for now. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to awaken your curiosity. Just like you, I eagerly await the lecture by the eminent guest speaker, Prof. Jay Winter, who is famous for his innovative research into the First World War. Considering his experience as co-producer, co-writer and chief historian for, amongst others, the successful television documentary about the First World War, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, he is undoubtedly the person *par excellence* to explain how to reach out to or get in touch with the unattainable inside of history. I look forward to hearing his views on how and why to introduce war in museums.

I wish you an exciting and interesting few days and look forward to all that is to come.

As ICOMAM chairman, I now officially declare this symposium open.

Piet de Gryse
ICOMAM Chairman

