

Trust and Museum: Transcultural Exchanges of Memory and Knowledge

by Hiju Kim

Dr. Sunhild Kleingärtner was the Executive Director of the German Maritime Museum/Leibniz Institute of Maritime History (DSM) and is Professor of Maritime History and Maritime Archaeology at the University of Bremen. She is involved in various museum and cultural policy committees. Her project is called 'TiM: Trust in Museums!' – a qualitative examination of public trust in museums in the U.S. and Germany on the basis of interviews and dialogues with representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations.¹

The following is a collection of redacted excerpts from a conversation with Dr. Kleingärtner, which offers transcultural insight into public trust in museums through visitor participation. As a fellow at the Thomas Mann House, she has discussed a diverse range of museum-related issues with undergraduate and graduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles, a mutual experience that has culminated in critical understandings of the different types of existing museums and the issue of political neutrality.

sites to build transatlantic connections and pathways in the U.S.

The Thomas Mann House, UCLA, and the Smithsonian Institution are places where open-minded people can come to discuss subjects of trust, listen to students' perspectives about community engagement, and closely follow the level of public trust as well as public vigilance in their institutions. 'Are museums political or not?' One cannot simply find public perception of institutions in the visitors' survey to tackle questions of fostering and building trust in museums.

the practical influence of visitor participation in research museums

Research museums are generally well-populated and information-based, encouraging visitor participation at times to apply their knowledge of local environments to data collection.²

the rise of community engagement after the Covid19 pandemic

When the museums reopened after the pandemic, the first visitors were people from the local community, those who were grateful to experience something cultural and different from their home environments.

questioning the neutrality of museums

It is very hard to say what is neutral and what is political. Choosing a particular topic for an exhibition is a political attitude, to declare that something is of importance, even without a political message. For a museum to be relevant for the society means to be, in a way, political.

museums as repositories of public memory and knowledge

For museums, it is very important not only to give information but also to give the public opportunities to contribute its own memories and knowledge. Connections can form through art and embodiments shared among the visitors.

offering guidance for international visitors or migrants

It is not easy for museums to determine whether or not visitors with a background of migration can be integrated into the society, but they can offer guided tours or courses for such visitors. Programs such as language courses, a combination of a guided tour and a language course, bring new visitors into the museums located in a city or a town.

public trust and private partnerships

In general, in Germany, there are not that many private partnerships connected to museums as much as there are in the U.S. On one hand, in the case of the Smithsonian Institution, it is good to have a stable public funding and flexible financial support. The conditions for using this source are not that strict as those for federal funding. But, sometimes, there is mistrust against some of the donors who offer their name for certain galleries or buildings in exchange for the money due to scandals. That's why some museums decided to shorten the periods for private partnerships. The treatise period is now, let's say, five years instead of twenty years.³

technological innovations for hands-on visitor engagement

Bringing technology into the museums for visitor engagement depends on your message, who your audience is, and the range of money you can spend. For example, there was the case of Polarstern, a research vessel frozen in the Arctic for 9 months to collect data concerning climate change.⁴ This research vessel was only for the scientists and the crew. At the German Maritime Museum, we asked ourselves: How can we virtually bring this huge research vessel into the museum? How can we give the visitors an impression of living, driving, and doing research on board? So, we had the museum's ground floor painted to have visitors immerse themselves in certain parts of the vessel by wearing a 3D mask. It was quite fascinating to find the right way of combining the real world with the virtual world.⁵

maintaining transparency at museums with history of displaced objects

A lot of museums do not exactly know what to do with some iconic works that are displaced objects. They are the heart of the museum, so when they are returned to their origins, the museum loses its identity. They also know that they have to start a discussion on what to do with the objects. It's a question of interests and identity. At the National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C., you can find displays with such words written on a small sheet of paper: "Displayed here was one of the Benin Bronzes, but due to the unclear situation and the fact that we do not have a direction for our institution, they were removed. As soon as we can give you more information, we will do so." This is a good way to give a signal to the public, to say that they are considering what to do for a proper solution. Communication is very important. The worst thing museums can do is to do nothing, to hide behind their walls and close their eyes in front of a complex situation.⁶

Notes

1. For more information about the question of trust in museums, see "What Does it Mean to Trust a Museum?" published by American Alliance of Museums, <https://www.aam-us.org/2022/03/01/what-does-it-mean-to-trust-a-museum/>.
2. Public engagement in research museums is often termed as "citizen science" or community science. For more information, see "Why Community Science?" published by Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, <https://nhmlac.org/why-community-science>.
3. Dr. Kleingärtner refers to the Sackler family scandal as an example of public mistrust caused by private partnerships. See "Museums all over the world are finally ditching the damaging Sackler name" published by Time Out, <https://www.timeout.com/news/museums-all-over-the-world-are-finally-ditching-the-damaging-sackler-name-051222>.
4. For more information about the Research Vessel Polarstern, visit <https://mosaic-expedition.org/expedition/polarstern/>.
5. For more information about the 360° Polarstern exhibition at the German Maritime Museum, visit <https://www.dsm.museum/en/exhibition/exhibitions/360-polarstern>.
6. For more information about the Smithsonian Institution's decision to repatriate the Benin Bronzes, see "The Smithsonian's Plan to Return the Benin Bronzes Comes After Years of Relationship Building" published by the Smithsonian Magazine, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-smithsonians-return-of-the-benin-bronzes-comes-after-years-of-relationship-building-180979716/>.