

Pourquoi?

Why Museology and Museums Should – more than ever –
be Part of the Heritage Paradigm...

Why museology should no longer be a part of heritage... This statement is the title of an article published in 2016 by the French museologist Serge Chaumier. Was the *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project* (IMP) then a waste of energy and work? No, I do not think so, on the contrary. But on the other hand, the fact that a professor in a scholarly discipline self-fashioned as *muséologie* et *l'expographie* makes such claims in a book called *Nouvelles tendances de la muséologie* cannot be ignored, as perhaps there could be readers who might not understand this was an ironic piece of satire about disciplinary claims and aspirations, and might be confused. Chaumier published several excellent books on museum work, then why this *faux pas* or brilliant satire? It deserves a reply; among others: IMP. Or the other contributions to this special issue of *Volkskunde*.

Pourquoi la muséologie ne devra plus être une composante du patrimoine?

Chaumier started by questioning the integration of the museum sector in the heritage sector and/or paradigm. Or the (sub)discipline museology as part of (the umbrella cluster of) heritage studies? It is not crystal clear: *la muséologie* on the one hand and *patrimoine* on the other hand. What does he mean? “Il est une idée de sens commun que l’on retrouve énoncée dans tous les ouvrages traitant de l’histoire et du secteur, qui est d’inclure sans autre forme de procès la muséologie à l’intérieur d’un vaste espace fourre-tout qui serait celui du patrimoine. Comme si le monde des musées et de l’exposition était placé nécessairement à l’intérieur de cet ensemble plus large.”¹

Chaumier questions the inevitability of these evolutions and tries, so he claims, to unmask “ideological prejudices” and to show the harmful consequences for the museum sector (“conséquences néfastes pour le secteur”). Let us follow his construction (that I prefer not to follow intellectually nor in practice). First he points out that since 1979 (1980 was the year of heritage in France) an important evolution was started, embracing and expanding the concept of *patrimoine*. He refers to the impulse given by Giscard d’Estaing (I

1 S. Chaumier, ‘Pourquoi la muséologie ne devra plus être une composante du patrimoine’, in: F. Mairesse (ed.), *Nouvelles tendances de la muséologie*. Paris, 2016, p. 67.

would also go for the duo François Mitterrand and Jack Lang). What happened according to Chaumier, was a process of inflation: “(...) l’inflation n’a cessé de croître et le concept est devenu un mot-valise qui absorbe tout (...)” It is like a monster that eats everything, even modern art in museums. Everything, from spoons to cathedrals, seems to become heritage. And this now extends to the present: even internet and digital culture is considered from a heritage perspective. Chaumier seems to regret it.

“L’ogre patrimoine dévore tout sur son passage, ne laisse rien échapper, entend que rien ne se perde Le syndrome de la perte, de la destruction de biens mémorables, du vandalisme, ...” He adds to this the incorporation of “popular culture”, related to an expanded conception of culture. This leads to the recognition of all kinds of types of heritage: “(...) tant le patrimoine vernaculaire que le patrimoine de nos grands-pères, les arts modestes, singuliers et même éphémères (mais que l’on veut néanmoins conserver) jusqu’au patrimoine immatériel.”²

Chaumier uses one negative metaphor after another, and does not seem to be very much in favor of what could also be called an opening up, a democratization process. Is it a bad case of preservationist bulimia, “(...) cette boulimie frénétique à vouloir tout conserver, tout préserver”? He contrasts this with memory work, which implies selection, forgetting and loss. He also confronts this interpretation of heritage with ‘living creativity’: “La création ne peut être que vivante que s’il y a possibilité de transformation et de métamorphose.”³

In architecture in particular, he evokes a discussion of the restraints imposed by heritage: “Par prudence il faudrait préserver, et si possible en l’état, en s’interdisant bien souvent de réinterpréter, d’adapter, de transformer. Car des notions plus que contestables d’authenticité et d’origine viennent souvent renforcer la doctrine pour fossiliser dans des classements et des labels des unités entières, contrôlées jalousement par des missionnaires zélés.”⁴ Chaumier emphasizes that the “ideology of authenticity” was formatted, in the worlds of built heritage and restoring paintings. This was nourishing not only the extremism of a group of heritage avengers and defenders, but also the supremacy of experts. Freezing or working with limited essentialist notions about what heritage is, is not a good idea, so ... away with the notion of heritage.

Why should museums be dragged into a monster breathing cold flames of ‘authenticity’ and inflexible expert monopolies, incapable of embracing change, transformation, or ‘living’ metaphors? So, in this (according to me) caricature, labelled “cette inflation, cette folie patrimoniale (qui ne fait que croître)”, why should museums play a role? In particular if they are presented as primarily places of conservation and preservation, keeping resources “en réserve.”

2 Chaumier, *Pourquoi*, p. 68.

3 Ibidem, p. 68.

4 Ibidem, p. 68.

But this would be a fourfold mistake to go that way, Chaumier (rightly) claims.

Firstly, he evokes the battles since the Sixties in France both on the level of the Republic or of the centralist Direction of Museums, in the Departments, on the local level or in the museums themselves, to evolve from a collections centered vision to a public/visitors/citizens oriented approach. Many victories were won, education and outreach services installed, mediation introduced...⁵ Involving and communicating with visitors and the public and professionalizing this evolution: that was what had happened in many museums in the last decades. But Chaumier fears it is not secure and anchored enough yet: that budget cuts or political interventions could turn back the clock. He is not sure if the population of museum professionals are really sensitized and convinced enough that this is really the way to go for museums, embracing the interaction with 'the public', next to preserving the collections. Is the education of these professionals, in universities or on the floor, really strong enough?: "Car il a fallu des années de combat pour qu'au sein des formations, et notamment celles pour les conservateurs, on fasse entendre (un peu) la voix des publics."⁶ Chaumier pleads to cultivate a healthy, balanced and non-exclusive relation with 'the collection' in museums, to make it clear that (work in) museums should be relevant for society.

The second reason Chaumier puts forward is *historiography*. One of the classic ways to present the history of museums is to construct a narrative that starts from closed collections of princes, noblemen, churches or rich merchants or phenomena like the *Wunderkammer*, over the opening up of collections in the Louvre and other museums at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, to a proliferation of museums in the 20th century, as open as possible for the broad public and for tourists. The episode of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution is so important because it was a period of opening up archives and museums (next to forms of appropriation by the State and collection mobility). The movement since the 1970s of *nouvelle muséologie* has reinforced this process. The tendency is clear: more and more open, reaching out to more and more people... Chaumier emphasizes that museums are invented for education, to inspire creativity ("pour l'inspiration et non pour la dévotion"). He also claims: "Contrairement aux apparences, le musée n'est pas créé pour des raisons patrimoniales mais par vocation sociale et culturelle."⁷ The recent history shows this opening up, but there are dangers, temptations, to reverse this process of opening and out-reach: "la tentation du repli est constante."⁸

The third reason is called, inaccurately, *sociologique*. Here Chaumier mentions the rise and growing importance of exhibitions and events: "l'exposition temporaire." This does not only occur in museums but in and on many other sites, ranging from galleries, art centers, community centers

5 S. Chaumier and F. Mairesse, *Médiation culturelle*. Paris, 2013.

6 Chaumier, *Pourquoi*, p. 71.

7 Ibidem, p. 72.

8 Ibidem, p. 74.

archives, libraries etc. It is not limited to heritage. It is freer because it is mainly about the presentation of a discourse, not necessarily with so-called authentic objects. It refers to a tendency in France to distinguish exhibitions and museum work, building on the work of Jean Davallon and inscribing it in communication studies and work. Here Chaumier makes a remarkable move in his construction that can be explained with staking (high) claims on the labor and higher education markets in France: “(...) il est convenu dans le secteur professionnel d'utiliser le terme de muséographie et de muséographe pour désigner l'ensemble des productions d'expositions. La muséologie recouvre l'étude de cet ensemble, et n'a donc plus guère à voir avec la notion de patrimoine.”⁹ It is not only an attempt to escape from heritage, it also launches another question related to museum functions. It was and is often the case that the scientific *conservateur* was the organizer or curator and designer of exhibitions. Is this a good option and are these not different skills sets? Should the exhibition designers and communicators work in the service of researchers or the other way around, or could/should they go through the process together from the onset? Should a special coordinator, a so-called *muséographe* not take central stage in designing and mounting the exhibition? Other specialists and researchers might then via a scientific committee, ‘irrigate’ the exposition with contents. Gradually it becomes clear what kind of ‘liberation struggle’ is resonating in these paragraphs: how to become freer from the dominance of the art historians or historians, linked to ‘*patrimoine*’/‘the past’. The problem is that today (for bigger exhibitions) it is no longer one curator or one researcher who is responsible, but a whole series of specialists, “une équipe de muséographie.”

The fourth reason was *epistemological*, linked again to the role of the so-called ‘*muséo-graphe*’. The idea is that an exhibition presupposes a ‘scenario’, with choices, positions, creative statements that are to be made. This presupposes intellectual work and professional skills, creativity and the role of an author. It is a discourse that Chaumier has developed in other publications. This kind of work is close to that of organizing a performance, an intervention, an event, a creative process: dynamics.

So how can something so dynamic, creative and contemporary be categorized as ‘*patrimoine*’: “Dès lors, ces formes extrêmes pointent l'incohérence de positionner l'exposition dans le champ du patrimoine alors qu'il s'agit véritablement de création contemporaine.”¹⁰

Chaumier goes on to push his argument and criticizes the organization of the French Ministry of Culture. He doubts if it is okay that the services for artistic creation are positioned under the *Direction du spectacle vivant*, while the museums for contemporary arts are constrained and forced, by falling under the authority of the Direction of Museums and hence under the authority of the *Direction Générale du patrimoine*. Will this lead to ‘freezing’ or to ‘fossilization’, to safe choices and retreating to the collections, away from creativity and communication? Do savor the message that makes clear that perhaps the cleavage is not so much between museums or expositions on the one hand and

9 Ibidem, p. 75.

10 Ibidem, p. 79.

heritage on the other hand, but that these concepts refer to something else: “En donnant autorité au scientifique ou au conservateur en quelque sorte, on prend le risque de revenir sur quarante ans d’avancées pour affirmer l’autonomie de la muséologie vis-à-vis des disciplines qu’elle sert, mais dans lesquelles elle ne se confond pas.”¹¹

In the conclusion, Chaumier pleads to go beyond the concept of ‘*patrimoine*’: “La part de création qu’il tolère demeure strictement encadrée et canalisée. Il est avant tout affaire de conservatisme, de préservation des biens acquis en vue de leur transmission.”¹²

So what is needed? In his article and in particular in the final paragraph, Chaumier gives his wish list of what should be invented or developed. Wanted: A more dynamic vision, interested in renewal, creation and giving energy

- nourished by otherness, by diversity;
- involving new generations;
- going for encounters, exchanges, collective enjoyment and understanding;
- oriented towards vitality, living culture rather than freezing the past;
- building on the role women play, cultivating ideas about ‘*matrimoine*’, ‘*ecofeminisme*’, etc.
- taking distance from a too strong emphasis on notions of authenticity;
- cultivating forms of communication towards a broader public, like in an exposition...

Ne pas pourquoi, pourquoi ne pas

Pourquoi pas? was the title of a Belgian satiric journal where humoristic pieces (nicknamed in the Brussels’ dialect *zwanze*) and more serious articles were combined. If you are aware of the emergence and strong points of the paradigm of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in particular the Basic Texts, identified in this issue as ‘the Blue Arsenal’ and if you have read the IMP volume¹³, you can only be puzzled when reading the statements of a prominent French *muséologue*. Is the article of Chaumier a brilliant caricature, a pastiche, a masterpiece of irony or satire, a parody...? Or is it just a saddening or arrogant attempt to defend a niche and stake in the education or job market for ‘*muséologues francophones*’? Giving the benefit of doubt, we will consider it as a rhetorical construction that emphasizes that it is high time among different actors in the heritage fields, including museums, communities, groups and individuals (CGIs) and other actors that work with the Ethical Principles of the UNESCO 2003 Convention and others, to join forces to defend and cultivate a number

11 Ibidem, p. 79.

12 Ibidem, p. 80.

13 T. Nikolić Đerić e.a. (eds.), *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st Century*. Bruges, 2020.

of positive evolutions that have been going on. It must be a satiric parody to demonstrate that museums and *muséologues* should do more effort to get acquainted with international developments (also those not published in French) to understand what is going on in the world. All the points on the wish list of Chaumier can be addressed and met with an intelligent use of the tools in the Blue Arsenal, the Basic Texts. They are applicable in 180 States, including France, as a reference for *heritage* policy, and can provide inspiration for the shrinking rest of the States that have not yet ratified, including Canada, hence including Québec. Problematising the notion of ‘authenticity’, embracing diversity, not freezing but transforming, stimulating creativity and adaptation, stimulating encounters, exchanges, collective enjoyment and understanding; going for being more gender sensitive, not only for women but also including all LGBTQIAP, and involving as many stakeholders as possible. Participation and involving stakeholders, this should be a shared agenda.¹⁴

There is definitely some work to do to get the museum networks and the academic world in France up to speed as far as the relation between museums and intangible cultural heritage is concerned. This was one of the conclusions of an important survey that was conducted by Isabel Chave and her team for the French Ministry of Culture, at the occasion of the IMP colloquium in France (February 5 and 6, 2019), in the Cité internationale de la tapisserie in Aubusson.¹⁵ These were the mains, presented on the IMP website:

“The preliminary findings allowed for a number of assertions to be made which demonstrate that intangible cultural heritage is a real challenge to museums:

- Most museums associate intangible cultural heritage with terms such as artisanal know-how, collective remembrance and legacies, and oral archives, which shows that the UNESCO’s official definition of ICH is only partially understood.
- For a large majority, intangible cultural heritage can help strengthen social ties and a sense of identity. Inhabitants of a territory can often times partake in the process, be it a cultural project, an exhibition

14 M. Jacobs, ‘Article 15. Participation of Communities, Groups, and Individuals. CGIs, not just “the Community”’, in: J. Blake and L. Lixinski (eds.), *The 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention. A Commentary*. Oxford, 2020, p. 273-289; Jacobs, ‘CGIs and Intangible Heritage Communities, museums engaged’, in: T. Nikolić Đerić e.a. (eds.), *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage. Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st Century*. Bruges, 2020, p. 38-41; M. Jacobs, ‘城市中的社区、群体、个人——保护非物质文化遗产、行动网与边界对象’, 南方科技大学社会科学高等研究院主编, *遗产 Heritage* 1:1, 2019, p. 15-36; M. Jacobs, ‘The Spirit of the Convention: Interlocking Principles and Ethics for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage’, *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 11, 2016, p. 71-87; and the projects described in M. Jacobs e.a. ‘Internationale netwerking, duurzame ontwikkeling en evoluerende kaders Het programma van de UNESCO-leerstoel voor kritische erfgoedstudies en het borgen van immaterieel cultureel erfgoed aan de Vrije Universiteit Brussel’, *Volkskunde. Tijdschrift over de cultuur van het dagelijks leven* 120:2, 2019, p. 179-191

15 *PCI et musées*, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Sites-thematiques/Patrimoine-culturel-immateriel/Res-sources/PCI-et-musees> (7/8/2020).

or an ethnological survey. Through intangible cultural heritage, the individual is brought back at the heart of patrimonialization. By its very definition, intangible cultural heritage is prone to inclusivity and co-construction, hence why most of the interviewees believe that intangible cultural heritage can add exiting new dimensions to existing projects.

- Almost 3/4 of museums have never received a training dedicated to intangible cultural heritage but 80% of them would like to.
- 50% of scientific and cultural projects in museums take into account intangible cultural heritage. However in the years to come, intangible cultural heritage will play a bigger role in subsequent scientific and cultural projects.
- Museums are still unfamiliar with the National Inventory: it is necessary to build bridges between museums and tools such as the National Inventory in order to make them relevant.
- Innovation is mostly noticeable in scenographic arrangements and specifically in immersive devices. As a general rule, most museums still do tend to apply standard practices and techniques to intangible cultural heritage.”¹⁶

So when the going gets tough, the tough should get going. It is no time to flee or hide away in a ‘*muséologie*’ cocoon and retreat to a cozy museum and/or museology (p)reservation but to join to co-creation.

Or to say it in French: “Il est surprenant que les musées, en tant qu’institutions par définition préoccupées de culture matérielle, débattent de culture immatérielle et y voient même un danger potentiel (...) Les musées pourraient tout aussi bien affirmer: ‘De toute évidence, cela ne nous concerne pas, sujet suivant s’il vous plait (...)’.”¹⁷ The author of these sharp phrases goes on to give nine reasons why this is not a good idea. But, of course, you can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot force it to drink.

16 *Report of the International Conference: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Museums and Innovation* (5.2.2019, Aubusson), <https://www.ichandmuseums.eu/en/reports/fr-international-conference> (9/8/2020).

17 W. Leimgruber, ‘Patrimoine culturel immatériel et musées: un danger?’, in: M.-O. Gonseth, e.a. (eds.), *Bruits. Echos du patrimoine culturel immatériel*. Neuchâtel, 2011, p. 34-46.