

PRESENTING “CONTESTED HISTORY” IN MUSEUMS:

Recommendations for Practitioners

Nowadays, museums encounter various complex challenges when constructing narratives about the past, such as navigating the divergent interpretations of events and expectations of different stakeholder groups. In response to this issue, the international **EUROPAST project** team invited the Lithuanian museum practitioners to participate in a workshop “Contested History in Museums”. **Dr Kristiane Janeke**, a historian and practitioner with much experience working in German and international museums and deep knowledge of the specificities of Eastern European museology, delivered a keynote presentation “The Role of Museums in the Co-creation of Public History” and led a workshop for museum practitioners. This served as a basis for the development of recommendations, provided in this document.

DISCUSSING CONTESTED PERIODS OF HISTORY IN MUSEUMS

- **Museum and civil society:** museums have a special mission to carry out in their respective societies. Thus, envisage the museum as an active civic actor. This might not always be easy or profitable, but it is meaningful for the common good.
- **Careful curation:** take objects seriously; precision regarding exhibits, object descriptions, and exhibition design are needed. Bear in mind the sensitivity of the topic you are engaging with and think thoroughly about each aspect of the exhibit and how it might be received by certain groups of visitors.
- **Identifying and targeting stakeholders:** identify and learn about your audience. Employ various media channels to present objects, and introduce different interpretations. For example, you may create podcasts (see **Example 1**), visit schools, cooperate with different stakeholders like NGOs and the public sector to engage in valuable public discussions.
- **Feedback:** collect visitor surveys and carefully analyse their data. Know how your visitors have received the exhibition – it might not always be what you think!

Example 1. The British Museum podcast episode “International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition”

The wide-ranging conversation touches upon how the British Museum engages with its own history and how was it shaped by the empire. Hartwig Fischer and Sushma Jansari are joined by guests Olivette Otele and Bonnie Greer, who discuss the legacies of slavery, its impact on today’s society, and how museums should respond to these histories both now and in the future.

“THE RIGHT INTERPRETATION” OF CONTESTED EVENTS IN MUSEUMS

- **Professionalism and strategy:** construct a clear concept of the exhibition or activity, know what message you are aiming to send, have a broader strategic plan (see **Example 2**), and set up self-evaluation criteria.
- **Science-based curation:** museums and academia should be inseparable when it comes to representing contested history. Therefore, use the latest scientific knowledge as a basis for your exhibition, cooperate with academia by organising academic discussions, workshops, and seminars. This will help to avoid factually incorrect information, minimise biases, and give context for the evaluation of different interpretations.
- **Inclusion:** the exhibition should not seek to support the interpretation of a specific group of people while abandoning others – it should be a place where different people and perspectives meet for a discussion. Therefore, introduce the interpretations of different social groups with possibly conflicting outlooks.
- **Conscious merchandise:** be conscious of the potentially problematic context of the exhibition and carefully choose the books and souvenirs to represent and merchandise at the exhibition. Merchandising on history periods and events that are marked with contested interpretation may trivialise and banalise things that should be taken very seriously and respectfully.
- **Building trust in the museum:** invest in the long-term trust and prestige of your institution regarding contested historical periods and events. Let people know you can be trusted with sensitive matters.

Example 2. National Museum of Ireland Strategic Plan 2023-2028

Reflecting the NMI’s expanded ambition to build and nurture its relationship with local communities over the next five years, representatives of local community groups joined the members of the Museum’s Board to officially launch the strategy at the National Museum of Ireland for 2023-2028. The strategy is based on five main pillars: stewardship, innovation, transparency, accessibility and collaboration.

CITIZENS’ AND COMMUNITIES’ ENGAGEMENT IN THE CO-CREATION OF PUBLIC HISTORY

- **Citizens’ engagement:** provide citizens with exclusive and exciting curatorship opportunities. This could be valuable both for the citizens involved and museums themselves. For example, collection of material with and from the public is a great way for people to tell their personal stories via concrete and individualised contributions to exhibitions. Moreover, it shows respect to communities on the part of the museum and may raise the self-esteem of contributors who may have been subjected to difficult experiences in the past. To work with the public, publish open calls for objects (artefacts) and stories, conduct in-depth interviews (see **Example 3**), etc.

- **Outreach:** the idea and experience of the museum should transcend its physical walls. If possible, bring your exhibitions to libraries, meeting spaces, cafés, publish them online, etc.
- **Active visitors' engagement with the exhibition:** an exhibition should be an interesting and immersive experience, explored with the support of various media tools and sources. Therefore, avoid rendering your visitors mere spectators and let them have a role in exhibitions.
- **Reciprocal educational activities:** set up focus groups with citizens, organise guided tours led by community members and practical educational activities for adults, children, and the youth. Teach others and learn from them yourself.
- **Open attitude:** being an expert in the field might make it difficult to take seriously the subjective and possibly biased opinions of the general public on the matter. However, subjective experiences, stories and views are valuable because they represent a complex social reality that we live in and that museums have a duty to explore.

Example 3. Oral history collections "Voices of the Manhattan project" by the Atomic Heritage Foundation and the Los Alamos Historical Society

The project digitises the oral histories regarding the development of the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos from the two above-mentioned institutions. It aims to provide a sense of both the commonality and diversity of the Manhattan Project experience for scholars, students, and the public.

FACILITATING COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC HISTORY

- **Political agency of museums:** museums are always political. This should not be an issue in a democratic society as long as the museum is transparent about it, maintains respect for opposing views and does not wish to suppress them. Embrace this fact and be open about the nature and message of your exhibitions. Avoiding political controversy at all costs to secure financial support might be at odds with the principles of a modern museum, thus, making it less valuable as a civic actor.
- **Financing opportunities:** actively reach out to public and private stakeholders and initiate partnerships. It is important to clearly communicate the value of the museum to society and maintain consistent partnerships with private stakeholders, thus driving forward the culture of donating to museums.
- **Open space:** be open to meaningful external initiatives as the museum spaces can serve as attractive alternatives for institutional and public events. In addition, allow the visitors to explore the museum independent of the exhibits. Provide accessible information about the museum in creative and innovative ways, suggest an opportunity to relax in a cafe or a restaurant in order to create an overall positive experience of the museum.

- **Expertise:** participate actively in creating and implementing new historical, political, and civic education programmes at the governmental level. Museums have both theoretical and practical knowledge that is intrinsic for the creation and implementation of education programmes as well as extensive experience in dealing with organisational and curatorial challenges.
- **Established network of stakeholders:** finding “allies” for the museum activities is key. Invite schools, education specialists, NGO representatives and other stakeholders to participate in museum activities. Build long-term partnerships with local- and national-level politicians and public servants. The cross-sectoral cooperation is very important when promoting the messages of exhibitions and strengthening the reputation of the museum. Modern museums are also spaces for communities to develop and engage in civic activities. Provide relevant communities with volunteering opportunities, create a local community around your museum, find patron(s) (see **Example 4**), and establish the network of museum ambassadors.

Example 4. Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania

In 2023, this museum in Vilnius, Lithuania acquired 27 paintings representing Western European art from the 15th to the 17th centuries from its patron. In the museum, the paintings are placed in this patron's existing picture gallery, thus solidifying the cooperation between the museum and its patron. The patron has not only enriched the museum's collection and made it more mature, but leading by example, he also highlighted the importance of a community of museums patrons.