



## **Identity, diversity and citizenship: Lessons for our national museums**

### **An NMDC roundtable seminar in association with ippr**

Wednesday 23 May 2007, hosted by the British Museum

#### **Summary**

National museums and archives have long been concerned with enabling the public to explore their heritage and identity and to understand different cultures. As holders of the 'national collections', the national museums and archives also provide a British narrative that spans both time and disciplines. National museums provide a vital source of learning for other public bodies concerned with identity, diversity and citizenship.

Museums and archives are viewed as neutral, non-religious public spaces which people trust and where they feel 'safe'. They offer expert, non-partisan interpretation of their collections and provide an impartial space for open engagement and debate. Museums and archives provide an invaluable educational tool in understanding identities, and unique opportunities to bring different people together.

#### **Chair:**

Sandy Nairne - Director, National Portrait Gallery

#### **Presenters:**

Ben Rogers - Former Associate Director, ippr

Rick Muir - Research Fellow, ippr

#### **Participants:**

Felicity Allen - Head of Education & Interpretation, Tate

Stephen Allen - Head of Learning & Programmes, National Museums Scotland

Patrick Brown - Head of Museums, Education & Diversity, DCMS

Catherine Chastney - Acting Head of Education, The Wallace Collection

Honor Gay - Head of Learning, Natural History Museum

Robin Gwyn - Director of Communications, National Museum Wales

Natasha Innocent - Senior Policy Adviser, Learning, MLA

Margaret Lincoln - Director, Research & Planning, National Maritime Museum

Justin Morris - Policy and International Programme Manager, British Museum

Keith Nichol - Deputy Director for Museums, Libraries & Cultural Property, DCMS

Eithne Nightingale - Head of Access, Social Inclusion & Community Development, V&A

Andrew Payne - Education Manager, National Archives

Dan Phillips - Head of Corporate Education, Imperial War Museum

Simon Pink - Assistant Director: Head of Finance & Operations, The Wallace Collection

Sharon Trotter - Acting Image and Identity Project Manager, V&A

Roger Walshe - Head of Learning, British Library

Colin Wiggins - Deputy Head of Education, National Gallery

Karen Young - Communications Officer, National Museums Liverpool

## **Presentation - Identity, diversity and citizenship: Lessons for our national museums**

**By Ben Rogers, ippr**

The ippr project *Identity, Culture and the Challenge of Diversity* considers how identities might contribute to different public policy goals and asks: what are the prospects for social justice, democracy and citizenship in a society characterised, as ours increasingly is, by high levels of diversity and individualism?

As part of the project, ippr identified lessons for the national museums, as set out by Ben Rogers in his presentation to the NMDC roundtable: [http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/identity\\_seminar.html](http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/identity_seminar.html)

In summary, Ben identified the **key contributions** that museums and archives can make to identities in Britain:

- economic integration
- facilitating contact and cultural exchange
- promoting shared values
- honouring and supporting minority identities
- fostering shared civic identities: national, local and super-national.

The ippr project also suggested some **challenges** for museums and archives in promoting a sense of shared identity, including:

- museums and archives are often remote from the places where cultural conflict is most intense
- museums are struggling like all organisations to keep up with the do-it-yourself age
- culture is ever more central in meeting the challenge of 'how we live together', but there is a fine art to balancing claims of contact, recognition and civic identities, not to mention the other things that museums are meant to do.

### **Seminar discussion**<sup>1</sup>

#### **a) Identity in the UK today**

The seminar began with a broad discussion on the theme of identities in Britain in response to Ben Rogers' presentation, before moving on to explore more specific issues for museums and archives.

Participants agreed that identity matters to people. Although there has been a decline in traditional identities - for example a decline in religious identity - in place of given identities people create their own individual and bespoke identities. It was felt that identity is complex and personal and not something that can be imposed by the state. Developing a shared 'British' identity must be a democratic and inclusive process, grown out of a 'grassroots' level rather than imposed in a 'top-down' manner.

#### **b) Museums and archives as the natural home for identity debates**

##### **1. Cultural history and British collections**

Museums and archives are a place of debate, questioning and learning. Rooting debate in collections can make it easier for people to engage with and explore personal and complex issues. There is an incredible richness and diversity in the UK's museum collections, with a relevance to many different British communities. Collections can help people understand and engage with their own cultural history and identity, as well as that of others, promoting understanding and empathy.

- The V&A has a long history of working with South Asian communities. This is due, in part, to the strength of the V&A's South Asian collections.
- The Natural History Museum's collections and work relates to more ancient identities, including the ancient history of the UK and Britons. Theories of human origins - for example

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<sup>1</sup> The views presented in this paper do not necessarily represent an NMDC position, rather a summary of discussion points made at an NMDC event.

that all modern humans are descended from Africans - prove that there can be scientific as well as cultural approaches to issues of identity.

## **2. Museums, archives and national identity**

The national museums and archives, as holders of the 'national collections', are viewed as holding something of the essence of 'Britishness'. They are therefore well-placed to provide a framework for debate on national identity.

The UK, as a union of countries with individual identities, has unique issues in defining 'national' identity. Scottish- and Welsh-ness are examples of national identity which remain strong, English-ness less so. The Government is keen to encourage and sustain collective notions of 'Britishness', so this will be an issue of continuing importance, and one to which museums can make a valuable contribution and provide valuable lessons to other sectors.

Museums and archives also have a valuable role to play in celebrating diversity, as opposed to simply attempting to create one identity. Participants suggested that it is important to avoid promoting 'mono-culturalism' as it can be exclusive and divisive. In illustration of this point, ippr project focus groups found that insecurity over culture and identity plays a role in anti-immigration sentiment. The group who felt most excluded, particularly in terms of cultural provision, were white working class people. In Barking and Dagenham there were complaints from white people that they were excluded from many local cultural events. Participants were clear that it is possible to mediate against this feeling of separation by promoting events that are accessible to all, bringing people together.

## **3. Museums as neutral spaces for debate**

Museums are seen as neutral, non-religious public spaces that people trust and where they feel 'safe'. They can offer impartial space for open engagement and debate. Some participants felt that it is not necessarily important what visitors see on the visit to a museum or gallery, moreover that museums bring people together, provide a space where a diverse range of people can interact.

- After the bombings on 7 July 2005 many people went to the National Portrait Gallery before the all-clear was given - the gallery was seen as a haven. This also happened in New York on 9/11.
- A large number of students have visited the British Library exhibition *Sacred*, an exhibition of Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy books and manuscripts. A key factor in this is that people see the Library as a neutral space where they can examine and better understand both their own and other religions, without experiencing prejudice or preaching.

## **4. Museums as a trusted source of information and expertise**

Museums are trusted and respected for their expertise and the reliable quality of their analysis and research. People trust museums to offer a truthful non-partisan interpretation of their collections and the issues raised by them. Museums therefore provide an invaluable educational tool in understanding identities.

- *Moving Here*, developed by The National Archives in partnership with 30 heritage organisations, enables users to explore 200 years of migration history to England of four ethnic communities.
- When he announced that slavery is to feature on the national curriculum, Alan Johnson praised the *Understanding Slavery* project (a national education project involving five museum partners).

## **c) Challenges for museums**

### **1. Engaging with culturally diverse audiences**

Museums have a responsibility to ensure that all sectors of the public are able to access and engage with their collections. Whilst museums have been successful in increasing the percentage of their visitors who come from black and minority ethnic (BME) and lower socio-economic groups, audiences are still not fully representative of the diversity of the UK population.

It was acknowledged that there is a lot of excellent work being done in museums with BME groups, but that engaging with certain communities and making collections and outputs relevant to them is an

ongoing issue. Working with appropriate partner organisations to deliver projects and engage new audiences is vital.

Participants also argued that collections are universal, and museums should not make the mistake of running projects that are designed for only one of the community. By catering to different groups separately, there is a danger of emphasising differences between people and of increasing barriers, rather than breaking them down.

- The National Gallery faces a challenge in making its collection - the majority of which is work by white, male Europeans - appealing to all areas of the community. The Gallery is currently undertaking research (to be published in November 2007) to examine why specific groups do not engage with all parts of the collection and the Gallery's activity.
- The Imperial War Museum has a challenge in making its remit (the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) relevant to audiences today. One example of how the museum has tackled this is the *Their Past Your Future* education project which has a strong focus on inter-generational contact, which is key to civic engagement and a sense of shared identity.

Museums face a related challenge in making their workforce and trustee boards more representative of the UK population, particularly in terms of ethnic diversity. This is an issue that government and museums have highlighted and are working to address.

## **2. Sustainability of engagement**

Concern was expressed that sustainability of engagement with hard to reach audiences is too often short-lived or episodic, principally due to limited funding. Outreach and community work tends to be related to temporary exhibitions, or to permanent collections which may not reflect or engage all sections of the community. For the same reasons outreach work in minority communities is often very small scale. However, participants did recognise that quality of engagement is crucial and providing high quality output often necessarily means smaller audiences.

It was acknowledged that politicians can be guilty of short-termism, in terms of strategy, policy and funding for museums, which hampers this important work.

## **3. Measuring museums' contribution**

Measuring and demonstrating evidence of the public value of museums in promoting understanding of identities and promoting community cohesion is an ongoing challenge. It is difficult to scientifically measure and document, for example, shifts in understanding of identities. Whilst it is accepted that government must be able to demonstrate an outcome from its investment there is also a need to explore better ways of understanding and communicating the value of museums' work.