

# Historical awareness: the role of archaeological open air museums

**How museums, including open-air museums, have a responsibility in raising historical awareness.**

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For the introduction meeting of the liveARCH project, I was asked to discuss the necessity of raising historical awareness and whether museums, and more specifically archaeological open air museums could play a role in it. I have the privilege to be the chairman of the European Museum Forum (EMF) and until January 2007 the creative director of Anno. In this paper, I will mix both occupations.

## Europe

One of the duties of the EMF is the European Museum of the Year Award. The members of the committee of the European Museum Forum look at museums from the visitor's point of view. What do people actually get from their visit to a museum? What do they take away with them in their minds and hearts?

That is why we are particularly looking for what we call Public Quality, that is the degree to which a museum meets the

needs and wishes of its visitors and provides for their comfort and convenience.

We are concerned with the way in which the collections are presented and interpreted, with the atmosphere of the museum, with effective management and publicity, and with the amenities provided for visitors. We are not primarily concerned with such professional matters as collecting policy, conservation, documentation or training, rather the means by which these are presented.

Good museums should be vibrant and stimulating centres of the community, where people from all walks of life can interact with the latest cultural ideas, with historical phenomena and with each other. A good museum is an active place, performance space, a venue in which to hang out, or drop by, or meet a friend, a place to be seen, a performance space, an enjoyable environment. We must offer a balance between an intellectual

learning environment and a relaxing, entertaining, more casual space. Flexibility, welcome, openness are key ingredients in attracting people and ensuring they return again and again.

We must reflect on the way in which we may choose another line of approach and convey another message. We must make our collections speak to our visitors (or "consumers" in general) in a different way, use them to open windows into their own world or environment. For museum professionals, such as us, it means a shift of focus from the collections to the public and from curatorial skill to a more comprehensive, interpretative and communicative approach to objects.

Collection stewardship is changing. Formerly curators needed to know what stuff they had, where it was and how to take good care of it. Nowadays curators must also



▲ Fig. 1 "Fear of diseases", part of the exhibition on history, Anno's house of fear. (All images © Anno: www.anno.nl.)

■ Fig. 2 Newsletter of Anno, presenting Dutch history with relevant links to the present, like immigration and emigration.

know what stuff they need to make sure visitors / consumers get some good out of it.

The members of EXARC are amongst the first to be aware of this shift of focus. As appears from my visits to some of your institutions and from your own brochure, published in November 2002, I quote: "the young generation is globalised, spoilt by wealth of impressions. At the age of 15, they



■ Fig. 3 Young pupils giving a guided tour at the WWII concentration camp 'Westerbork' in the Netherlands



■ Fig. 4 The 'house of fear' in Utrecht, the Netherlands, with which Anno tries to present history in a popular way



■ Fig. 5 Weekly column of Anno in a popular free national newspaper.

▼ Fig. 6 Still from the website www.anno.nl.

have travelled more than have any of their ancestors of the last 10.000 years. No wonder that they are not that interested in seeing some corroded fragments in a showcase. They want the closer, more personal contact with history, which can be given by the living education available at reconstructed villages” (Schöbel, Johansson & Paardekooper e.a. 2002, 4).

## The Netherlands

Education in history has been very poor in Holland during the last two generations. As a result in particular the feeling for chronology has gone: many youngsters have no idea who was first: Napoleon or Hitler. That’s why the Minister of Education set up Anno. Though the politicians support Anno, they wanted more. In July 2006 the Dutch Parliament almost unanimously accepted a resolution forcing the Minister of Education, Culture and Science to deliver a rough draft for a Dutch National History Museum before the start of the new Parliamentary Year (mid Sept. 2006).

There are many historical museums in Holland: the Museum of Antiquities, the Dutch Open Air Museum and the Amsterdam-

dam Historical Museum are the most famous ones. Many more national, provincial, municipal and private museums are already dealing with history. But none of them offers a clearly arranged presentation on the national history of my country. This might be one of the reasons for the great lack of historical awareness and knowledge of the last two generations of the Dutch population. Of all Dutch people, 38% visits a museum.

I was asked to sacrifice my Summer holidays to write such a draft, being a historian originally, having been a director of two museums in Holland, and being aware of what is going on in the international museum scene, thanks to my longstanding membership of the European Museum of the Year Award jury. It has been a challenging pleasure to have the opportunity to describe, as an independent expert, my vision of a really modern history museum.

The National History Museum offers the Dutch multicultural society a complete and coherent view of the history of the Netherlands in strictly chronological order. The main target groups are pupils from all walks of life – 7 to 16 years of age – and inexperienced museum visitors. That is why interactivity, multimedia – including mobile phones of course – are key words in developing the presentations. Visitors must experience history without any elitist thresholds. They must be enabled to identify themselves with the contents, the stories shown. So, actuality will be the starting point of all exhibitions, manifestations, performances, debates and other events.

## Archaeological open air museums

You know where your museums are coming from, but you need to define yourselves better. What works for one, might work differently for the other,

but all of you have the same goals and methods.

You need to be building a bridge from the present to the past. There is important relevance in the past for the present. Archaeology is a kind of guide, taking you on a tour. The goal is to bring the visitor to the past and bring him back.

A museum is not about reading, but about giving information. You should be good at leaving things out and showing the main line. Archaeological open air museums is one level of museum, it needs to perform well. Traditional museums are a second level. You should not just do what the public wants, but you should definitely be aware of what they like. Every visitor selects what he / she wants or is interested in. Both traditional museums and archaeological open air museums will play a role in showing the present state of knowledge.

Being popular does not mean that everything needs to be oversimplified. Information is like a kind of staircase: you have basic knowledge for starters and always a second level for who wants to go further. This does not mean simplifying everything, but about telling the basics in a clear, non-superficial way, adding to this a second layer for those who are interested.

Archaeological open air museums fit seamlessly into my view of how museums must present themselves in order to attract people of all walks of life and in particular inexperienced museum visitors. Living history, re-enactment experimental archaeology as such are excellent tools to involve them, to make them enthusiastic.

## Bibliography

Gunter Schöbel, Johansson & Paardekooper e.a. 2002: Archäologische Freilichtmuseen in Europa – Archaeological Open Air Museums in Europe, Schriftenreihe des Pfahlbaumuseums Unteruhldingen, Band 5. Unteruhldingen.

## Summary

### Historisches Bewusstsein – die Rolle archäologischer Freilichtmuseen

Museen im allgemeinen und Freilichtmuseen im besonderen haben eine Verantwortung, bei den Besuchern ein historisches Bewusstsein zu wecken. Gute Museen sollten lebendige und stimulierende Zentren in einer Gemeinde sein, in denen Personen aller Altersgruppen mit den neuesten Ideen aus dem Kulturleben, mit historischen Phänomenen und miteinander zusammen treffen können. Gute Museen sind aktive Einrichtungen, die eine Balance zwischen einer lernfreundlichen Umgebung und einem zu Erholungs- und Unterhaltungszwecken geeigneten Raum bieten. Die Besucher sollten in die Lage versetzt werden, sich selber in den Inhalten der Ausstellungen wiederzufinden. Die Museen sollten dabei nicht das tun, was die Öffentlichkeit möchte, sie sollten aber wissen, was der Öffentlichkeit gefällt. Flexibilität, ein freundliches Willkommen und Offenheit sind die Schlüsselfaktoren, um Besucher zu gewinnen und zu erreichen, das sie auch anschließend mehrfach wiederkommen.

### Conscience historique – rôle des musées archéologiques en plein air

Les musées, ceux en plein air inclus, devraient rehausser sans cesse le niveau de la conscience historique. Il est souhaitable que les bons musées soient des centres vivants de la société où toutes les couches sociales et tranches d’âge entreraient en contact avec des idées culturelles récentes et des phénomènes historiques, ainsi qu’avec eux-mêmes. Le musée de qualité propose en équilibre de l’espace d’éducation et de détente. Les visiteurs devraient être capables de s’identifier au contenu de l’exposition. Et bien que les musées ne doivent pas succomber à la dictée du public, il importe qu’ils soient conscients de ses intérêts. L’adaptation, atmosphère accueillante et ouverture sont des éléments fondamentaux qui font venir des visiteurs et garantissent que ceux-ci rentreront.

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