

MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS IN DIALOGUE II : MUSEU D'HISTORIA DE CATALUNYA, MAY 4, 2007

On Friday, May 4, 2007, the International Association of History Museums organised a visit for museum professionals to the *Museu d'Historia de Catalunya* in Barcelona, Spain.

The choice of this museum was based on multiple reasons. Firstly, it is one of the very important museums within Europe to present the history of a nation re-emerging from the break-up of monolithic national state ideologies. Catalan identity is becoming an important component of contemporary Spain, deemed worthy to be presented – and promoted – through this grand museological project. Secondly, the permanent exhibition, which was considered innovatory when the museum was opened ten years ago, is today under re-examination, due to be replaced soon.

The Director of the MHC, Mr. Jaume Sobrequés i Callicó welcomed the participants, and Exhibitions Director Mr Jusep Boya I Busquets made a global presentation of the history of the MHC, of its identity, of its goals and of the means to achieve these. The guided visit to the museum occupied the major part of the morning session. After a pause for lunch, which was graciously offered by the host museum, followed the visit to the exhibition on witch hunting in Catalonia (*Per bruixa i metzinera. La cacera de bruixes a Catalunya*). This exhibit is designed as a prefiguration of possible approaches, styles and museographical solutions to be given to the new permanent exhibition, for which discussion has begun. The round table discussion which occupied the latter part of the afternoon, focussed on the identity problems of the museum and on its situation in the political scene of Catalonia.

The origins of the founding of the MHC rest in the post-Franco political forces which led to the recognition of Catalan autonomy, and in the need for a national history museum. The museum is a creation of politicians, with an educational aim, and without any pre-existing collection of objects. This fact is reflected in the permanent exhibition, heavy with reproductions and maquettes, narrative in its approach, popular and successful with school classes but in an important measure not appreciated by the general public. The museum also severely lacks storage space, which was not foreseen upon its creation.

Despite its modern outlook and the central situation of its building, within the refurbished seafront of the city, the museum does not consider itself successful in the approach of the local Barcelonese public, nor of the visitors to this very touristic city of the Mediterranean. It depends directly upon the Catalan ministry of culture, which often interferes with its activity program, imposing commemoration exhibitions and other activities, often indifferent to the public and not letting the museum follow a coherent activity program which would have the effect of creating a fidelity relationship with it. The building housing the museum is itself an administrative concession with specific architectural limitations, and does not belong to it.

The visitor, being confronted to an important quantity of text (until recently only available in Catalan language) and a narrative approach, does not manage to get a real idea of why Catalans should have any particular identity different from the Spanish one. This is considered the main problem which a new permanent exhibition will have to address.

On the other hand, all participants noted the successful insertion of the museum within the school curriculum and the important number of visiting classes, guided by well experienced independent guides, and profiting from the existence of the rich use of scenography. The numbers of visitors in general are quite high for a history museum (more than 300.000 per year). The fact that the museum itself is so well aware of its problems, and the fact that it still enjoys political support, are factors which can lead to much happier solutions in the oncoming refurbishment. Temporary exhibitions show a very positive approach to contemporary museological standards and, when discussing subjects chosen and prepared with intellectual freedom by the museum personnel, show considerable visitor attraction capabilities.

The administration council of the IAHM expresses its sincere gratitude to the Museum of Catalonian History and particularly to the exhibitions director Mr Jusep Boya I Busquets. The presentation and discussion were characterised by honesty and open-mindedness, which made this visit particularly valuable to all participants.