

INTRODUCTION

PATRÍCIA ROQUE MARTINS

ALICE LUCAS SEMEDO

CLARA FRAYÃO CAMACHO

This e-book brings together a number of presentations submitted at the international meeting *Representing Disability in Museums, Imaginary and Identities*, promoted by the Transdisciplinary Research Centre Culture, Space and Memory (CITCEM) of the University of Porto and by the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC), with the support of Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis, on 29 May 2017. This meeting draws on the post-Doctorate research project entitled *A Representação da Deficiência nas Coleções dos Museus da DGPC: Discurso, Identidades e Sentido de Pertença* [The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging] (supported by a FCT Grant: SFRH/BPD/110497/2015), by Patrícia Roque Martins and hosted by the Department of Sciences and Heritage Techniques of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto and by the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage. This research project aimed at intersecting different approaches to disability, both in the Portuguese case and international good practices, in particular disability studies, museum studies, art history, sociology, anthropology and art education.

Also, this meeting is an important contribution to CITCEM's internationalisation and research strategy developed within the research strand Education and Societal Challenges, specifically on the theme «Alterity in Us», which addresses issues of tolerance/intolerance, inclusion/exclusion, assimilation/discrimination. This approach aims at identifying alterities, analysing expressions of difference and interaction over time and space, and pinpointing memories and their respective traces. In addition to conference

papers, a text by the workshop mediator Amanda Cachia is also included in this volume, broadening the scope of the discussion and make it more comprehensive and wide-ranging.

Although in recent years the representation of disability in museums has raised much interest among the academic community as a social group, disabled people are still sub-represented in museum narratives and overall this remains a subject touched upon with some caution by the cultural practitioners. The discussion about these issues has been regarded as an important way to better understand disability, showing, in particular, its potential to gradually counteract forms of oppression and exclusion of disabled people in the museum context. Integrating narratives on disability in museums' discursive practices seems to prompt their audiences to carry out deeper analyses on how through historic-artistic heritage the socio-cultural imaginary has been shaped and has influenced the attitudes and social values towards disabled people. The ways disability is represented in museums show how identities and specific social categories were assigned to this social group, being conducive, over time, to discriminatory and exclusion practices. In this sense, the social function of the museum also refers to ways to deal with these shortcomings and has significant impacts both on the cultural approach to disability and on the construction of more positive identities which aim for the inclusion of disabled people in today's society.

The various approaches in the e-book's six chapters authored by scholars and researchers, cultural practitioners and activists, privilege transversal and multidisciplinary knowledge, highlighting singularities, understanding contexts and systems of relations, and confronting experiences of interpretation and dissemination of disability.

Although the perspectives of the authors differ, they all share one characteristic: the established relationship between the cultural meaning of disability and the historical process of social inequality. The authors highly emphasise the transformation of thought that incorporates discourse and social practices as being essential to counteract the negative narratives, both of the past and of the present, of the social phenomenon of disability. Some authors explore directly representation practices in museums and social exclusion issues found in the dynamic relationship between discourse and the formation of identities. Other authors stress the social role of the museum as an agent of change and consider that it has the potential to influence how society relates to disability, while others regard the history of disability as the starting point to interpret the contemporary meaning of the topic. The representation of disability is, therefore, seen as a vital demonstration of how the life experiences of disabled people have been portrayed, steering the role of museums towards the exploration of alternative ways of looking at disability.

The chapters in this e-book address three essential topics in the articulation between museums and disability: i) the representation of disability in museum collections; ii) the historic and social contextualisation of disability; iii) cultural accessibility.

In the first part, the chapter on *The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museums Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging*, Patrícia Roque Martins focuses her attention on a series of objects with different categories and chronologies found in Portuguese DGPC museum collections related to the topic at hand. The chapter *Re-framing Disability: Exhibiting Difference in the Medical Museum*, by Emma Shepley and Bridget Telfer, addresses research developed by The Royal College of Physicians in the United Kingdom, on the exhibition *Re-framing Disability*. The researchers worked with 27 disabled people researching their interpretations of a number of portraits from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries representing disabled people. In the following chapter — *Down and Out and Disabled in the Middle Ages? Medieval Attitudes, Modern Assumptions and Public Dis/ability History* — Cordula Nolte offers an overview of the current research developed within the research group *homo-debilis* at the University of Bremen, in Germany, and examines the visual representations that report the story of disability from a Medieval perspective.

The second part covers the historical and social context of disability. The chapter *Framing Disability in Portugal: Historical Processes and Hegemonic Narratives*, by Fernando Fontes, looks into the cultural and social dynamics that form the narratives of disability and their impact on the living conditions and opportunities of disabled people, focusing in particular on the Portuguese case.

In the last section of the e-book, on cultural accessibility, the chapter *Collaborative Artistic Practices for Cultural Accessibility: Building Bridges Between Disability and Community*, by Amanda Robledo, contains a series of programmes and projects promoted by Spanish museums and art centres, namely by *The Tuya Foundation* and *Pedagogías Invisibles*, dedicated to disabled people at risk of exclusion. The chapter *The Politics of «Creative Access»: Guidelines for a Critical Dis/ability Curatorial Practice*, by Amanda Cachia, analyses the idea of «creative access» from the viewpoint of a curator who identifies himself as being a disabled person, offering instructions, recommendations and examples of exhibitions on art centres in the United States for the development of «dis/ability curatorial practice».

Finally, *Uncovering Hidden Stories in Museums: a Path Toward Visibility, Diversity and Inclusion*, by Ana Carvalho, reflects on the topic of representation of disability in museums, recalling the topics discussed at the international meeting and addressing future issues on this matter. In the presentations *The Identity and Representation of the Person with Disabilities*, by Lia Ferreira, and *Microaggressions Represented in Identity and Imaginary of Disability in Museums*, by Hélia Filipe Saraiva, their role as mediators of the international meeting was transferred to the production of texts that separate the above chapters. The live visual interpretations of the artists Dora Martins, Constança Araújo Amador and Joel Faria on the international meeting day are shown before each chapter.

The aim of the publication of this open access e-book is to increase scientific knowledge in museology and disability studies, more specifically in relation to issues concerned with identity, discourses and representations, as well as their impact on the contemporary problems of social exclusion. This book is, therefore, a useful tool for museum and disability practitioners, students and researchers, and people interested in this topic. Moreover, it takes an international approach, bringing together a number of research works and practices conducted in some parts of the world. Its purpose is to also disseminate information on the Portuguese context, informing both about the cultural history of disability and the researchers who have studied this subject and the international views that have emerged on the subject in Portugal.