

UNCOVERING HIDDEN STORIES IN MUSEUMS: A PATH TOWARD VISIBILITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

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This chapter results from the participation in the discussions that emerged from the international meeting *Representing Disability in Museums, Imaginary and Identities*, held at the *Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis* (Porto) the 29th of May 2017¹. The *raison d'être* of this meeting was shaped by the ongoing research project *The Representation of the Disability in DGPC Museums Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging* lead by the researcher Patrícia Roque Martins, which was granted in 2015 with a fellowship from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. The project is being hosted by University of Porto in collaboration with the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC). It addresses the issue of disability in Portuguese national museums from the perspective of representation, aiming to rethink the theme by looking at collections and analyzing material evidence about disability through time, a theme that remain so far unexplored in the Portuguese museums panorama.

Can museum objects really address disability, and moreover, can they help to develop narratives that engage audiences in rethinking attitudes towards disability in contemporary issues and debates? The answer is affirmative as the project rationale

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demonstrates, but one would not be surprised if, among museum professionals, the idea can still cause some reservation, suspicion or oddity.

While the topic is receiving more attention internationally, including within the museum studies and in museums practice², and some positive developments can be identified from a main framework at European level and national policies³ — addressing the issue as a human rights concern — disability-related narratives in museum exhibitions still lack representation and visibility. This was also a point remarked during the international meeting *Representing Disability in Museums, Imaginary and Identities*, while discussing several case studies of exhibitions dealing with the representation of disabled people. That was the case of *Reframing Disability* (2012-2015), an (awarded) exhibition organized by the Royal College of Physicians Museum (London) that explored a group of rare portraits from the 17th to the 19th centuries depicting disabled people, combining it with a contemporary view by inviting 27 disabled participants to bring their testimonies. In this exhibition, in one of the wall panels a central sentence strikes out — *An exhibition exploring four centuries of hidden history* — underlining the importance of exploring this topic but recognizing its marked absence as well. Another case presented was the exhibition curated by the research group *Home Debilis* from the University of Bremen in 2012. By using medieval texts and visual representations, the exhibition aimed to question common clichés regarding dis/ability in the premodern era from different perspectives (history, history of art and of language, archeology and anthropology) — which is at the core of the research carried out by this group of academics.

By gathering projects in exhibiting disability taking place in different contexts, the international meeting clearly reinforced a common ground for discussion that crosses different disciplinary and institutional experiences, and the need to share common principles and practices. At the same time, it also contributes to put in the agenda a theme that, while having some recognition, is still in the margins of contemporary museology debates. Furthermore, it remains central that a research project such as *The Representation of the Disability in DGPC Museums Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging* can catalyze debate and action in the museum field — where the universities role is key —, especially in present times where it seems to be less space to experimentation, in part due to budget restraints in the museums panorama — in consequence of the financial crisis that lead to main changes in public policies in last years, putting museums at minimum levels of action and to basic functioning parameters⁴. Another point that the project *The Representation of the Disability in DGPC Museums Collections* emphasizes is the mutual benefits of a more active partnership between academia and museums,

² SANDELL *et al.*, 2010.

³ MARTINS, 2017: 21-55.

⁴ See, for instance, ICOM PORTUGAL, 2017 for a global assessment report about some of consequences that Portuguese museums have been facing in the last years.

which means to find more effective paths to interlink theory and practice in museums, a connection that still lacks in the Portuguese case in a more systematic and enduring way.

CONTRIBUTING FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Taking in consideration a larger framework, bringing disability issues to present-day debates also challenges museums to reframe their social role in contemporary society. In the last decades extensive literature has been produced about museums role, discussing the need to adapt to a changing and continuously challenging society, reviewing museum frontiers and methods. The demand for a more acting role is also linked to the need to achieve relevance, as museums are rooted in society, and where there is a role to fulfill reflecting on historical issues, but also linking them to the social and cultural issues of present-day. For instance, the report and campaign *Museums Change Lives* (2013) from the Museums Association makes that point clear, advocating for the importance of maximizing the museums social role and impact in contemporary life. More recently, the UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society* (2015) also establishes general guidelines about the museums social role, underlining their contributions to social integration and cohesion, and diminishing inequalities⁵.

In such umbrella for museums social role can also be included the banner of cultural diversity and inclusion, reinforcing museums as spaces of representation of different identities and multiple views about the world. In 2017 the theme chosen to reflect and celebrate the International Museums Day was *Museums and Contested Histories: Saying the Unspeakable in Museums*. An array of possibilities emerged: from controversial and contested stories to traumatic historical events (holocaust, genocides), taboo issues (in some countries: slavery, colonialism, etc.), reconciliation stories (ex. Apartheid), objects repatriation, illicit traffic, sub representation of groups or communities, and other issues related to genre, migration, etc. Clearly, there are many hidden stories in museums to uncover as acknowledged by the ICOM's choice of theme. One could argue that disability representation is among the hidden stories to uncover in the museum's scenery. Furthermore, as observed among the projects discussed in the international meeting *Representing Disability in Museums, Imaginary and Identities*, one of the driving leitmotifs is the possibility of using museum objects not only as relevant material evidence to sustain reinterpretation or new narratives, but also the opportunity for museums to engage with contemporary topics. This envisages the idea that museums can contribute to shape conversations about disability in our society, tackling misunderstandings and stereotypes to promote comprehension and dialogue. As spaces of negotiating difference, museums select what is represented, what is included and excluded. Consequently, there is the

⁵ Cf. CAMACHO *et al.*, 2016.

potentiality of affirming themselves as spaces for the promotion of intercultural dialogue by debating society issues and a plurality of views, bringing to the arena silenced or neglected voices by creating constructive environments that facilitate collective reflection. In this way museums can contribute for dialogue, and to a better understanding of the obstacles of living in society⁶. In theory, this is consistent with abandoning the idea of a museum discourse based in neutrality, and framed exclusively in one voice. This acknowledgment means also rethinking museum practices: who and what is represented, how is represented, and who speaks for who?

In fact, there are many opportunities for museums to be working more closely with their constituencies and to become and stay relevant in society. Yet, in spite of embracing a more conscious role in society, many museums fail to be «for» people and «with» people. As museum director, David Fleming, points out, museum strategies committed to social relevancy are still considered radical thinking, and remain at the margins of mainstream museums⁷.

APPROACHING DISABILITY IN PORTUGUESE MUSEUMS: IN A TURNING POINT?

The most recent history of museums has been marked by a change of paradigm that points out a need for museum transformation and redefinition, traditionally viewed as elitist and exclusive, to become socially responsible organizations. This requires for museums to be more accessible, participatory and inclusive, taking in consideration the needs and interests of different audiences⁸. In this path to ensure public policies towards diversity, museums have been developing strategies to eliminate barriers at multiple levels, from ethnicity, to genre, religion, sexuality (ex. GLBT), intergenerational, but also to physical, social and intellectual aspects of access. These strategies not only suggest the need to adapt museum spaces, but also the need to provide useful information and improve communication and review the way people are welcome in museums. Another aspect is to design public programs that are relevant to specific groups. Furthermore, to use museums as spaces for representation of different identities involving groups under-represented. But above all, it means developing a diversity strategy at different levels of the museum practice and crossing all sectors. It also reinforces the need of a strategy focused at diversifying audiences by envisioning diversity as a central concern of the museum practice rather than taking the form of episodic or peripheral measures.

Disability is not a strange word in the context of Portuguese museums. In fact, some developments can be observed, especially with the turn to XXI century. In what concerns disabled people, it has prevailed a strong focus in improving physical access.

⁶ KREPS, 2013.

⁷ FLEMING, 2012.

⁸ See also CARVALHO, 2016.

Furthermore, some specific public programs have been developed; globally, can also be observed a growing understanding of museum accessibility beyond the physical barriers. However, in spite of some improvements in eliminating architectonic barriers and some advances in communication and welcoming staff and facilities, many barriers still persist, including physical, but not exclusively, that still apart disabled people from museums⁹. The recent digital publication *Guia de Boas Práticas de Acessibilidade: Comunicação Inclusiva em Monumentos, Palácios e Museus*¹⁰ still emphasizes the need to improve access conditions and communication in cultural spaces. In that sense, it makes clear that it is a working process, and additional efforts should be taken into practice in the Portuguese museum sector in order to move the issue to another level. Main challenges are also identified by Martins¹¹ that point out organization (and strategic) changes, professional capacitation crossing all museum departments, namely museum leaderships strongly committed, investment in involving groups of interest by promoting active partnerships, a continuous offer of museum public programs for disabled people, and the need to evaluate programs and initiatives impact and effectiveness. In resume, museums in order to be capacitating need to be firstly capacitated. Another step to be taken is within the context of representation, where the project *The Representation of the Disability in DGPC Museums Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging* bring novelty, may open new and future insights.

ADDRESSING THE RISKS AND MOVING FORWARD

Dealing with the subject difference in museums, whether in the realm of disability or other kinds of differences, brings along risks that should be taken in consideration and reflected by museum professionals prior to any action. Building on the discussions, formal or informal, that emerged within the international meeting, some of those risks were tackle. Among them, the risk of reinforcing differences (from a negative point of view), and misunderstandings; the risk of increasing a divisive line between us and them; the risk of offering sensationalism instead of comprehension; the risk of using inappropriate language and terminologies (not an obvious topic and in some ways not consensual); finally, the risk of perceiving disability as a homogeneous group. As a social minority, these groups have shared in common social exclusion in society, but disability presents itself in a multitude and diversity of situations and different levels that, consequently, require specific needs.

By briefly mentioning these risks, one does not argue a passive role from museum professionals, by the contrary, the need to approach disability in museums practice in a better-informed process. As demonstrated in this international meeting by Fernando

⁹ MARTINS, 2017.

¹⁰ MINEIRO, 2017.

¹¹ MARTINS, 2017.

Fontes (*Framing Disability in Portugal: Historical Processes and Hegemonic Narratives*) an historical perspective that highlighted how disability has been understood through time and by several institutions (state, church, associations, etc.) clarifies that there is no single definition for disability and remarks the contribution of other areas to better understand this reality.

PERSPECTIVES

One of the points mentioned in this international meeting was that there are no definitive solutions dealing with disability in museums. However, a more acting role of museums and professionals is needed to push forward creative thinking in designing practices to approach disability, contributing to reduce its invisibility. Furthermore, it requires considerable changes. In this respect, several aspects remain crucial. Amongst them, the need of sensitization about these issues within the organisations governance, and the commitment of leaderships at different levels.

Another point is the awareness that there are different models of understanding integration and inclusion. If in the past some strategies that envisage integration were conceived in a way that reinforced a sort of exclusive bubbles by developing programs strictly orientated to and within groups of disabled people, revised strategies may be necessary to support deeper inclusion. This reinforces the combination of diverse and complementary strategies in order to place inclusion as a mainstream goal. Evaluation of such processes remains essential to assess programs impact and move forward in a reflexive and constructive way. Active listening, as a soft skill, and the empathy of placing ourselves in the place of the other may be an exercise that offers some guidance in the self-assessment of the programs carried out.

Developing sustainable partnerships with groups and communities associated with disability remains a central issue. The notion of participation is not new in the field of museums — and cultural organizations at large¹² —, and is seen as a challenging growing field of experimentation¹³. However, working collaboratively and capacity building of such partnerships in the context of disability groups in a more committed way is still a struggling issue in the Portuguese museums panorama¹⁴. On the other hand, the episodic nature and lack of continuity of projects and activities dealing with disability, their remit to special programs carried out isolated or in specific museum departments instead of approaches that involve the museum as a whole, are indeed critical challenges.

The diverse perspectives feature in this Meeting offered not only a common ground of principles in this area but contributed also to a stimulating ongoing debate to explore new ways of envisioning the role of the museum in the XXI century — a museum more

¹² CARVALHO, 2016.

¹³ ANTOS *et al.*, 2017.

¹⁴ See MARTINS, 2017.

connected to society, that celebrates cultural diversity, promote accessibility, representation and the participation of diverse audiences. Clearly, projects such as *The Representation of the Disability in DGPC Museums Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging* may contribute to unlock new fields of experimentation and critical thinking.

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