

## AMERICAN MUSEUMS: PUTTING VISITORS FIRST

ICOM-Germany Annual Meeting, at the GHI. Conveners: Hans-Martin Hinz (President, ICOM) and Christof Mauch (GHI).

Why did one hundred German museum directors, curators, educators, and marketing experts set out for Washington in November 2003? In cooperation with and hosted by the German Historical Institute, they came to America's capital to find out more about developments in America's museums.

Do American museums have an edge on German institutions? In Germany, as in many other European countries, museums have been affected by the progressive decline of public funds, which in turn has endangered the very foundations of their work. Although these public contributions formed the basis for Germany's rich and varied museum landscape, times of budgetary crisis require new strategies for dealing with the repercussions of decades of dependence. To secure their institutional futures, German museums must aim to discover new sources of funding. In the last twenty years, America's museums have succeeded in massively transforming their financial structures, transitioning to a reported average earned income rate of close to 50 percent, compared to a German rate of only 5 percent.

The philosophy of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) promotes international dialogue on fundamental questions whenever possible, encouraging individual members to learn how others have tackled similar problems. This form of analysis and debate makes it easier to assess, or even to change, one's own positions. Building on the programmatic work of ICOM-Germany over the past years and the contemporary relevance of the topic, the German national committee decided to schedule its first ever non-European annual meeting, with the help and support of the GHI in Washington. Working together, ICOM-Germany and ICOM-USA formulated the conference theme: "America's Museums—Putting Visitors First!" (For a list of the American panelists and the program please see [www.icom-deutschland.de](http://www.icom-deutschland.de).)

The respective frameworks for museum work in Germany and America differ: a considerable number of American museums were built with educational policy goals in mind and have concentrated heavily on visitor services, whereas in Europe, collections play a pivotal role. In the United States, this educational focus has led museums to treat visitors as clients rather than as guests, putting them at the center of conceptual reflections. As a quantitative result, this has produced higher rates of attendance in America than in Germany—only a third of Americans do

not go to museums—but it has also had a qualitative effect on museum organization. Making increased attendance a goal has created a greater balance between museum administrators, curators, educators, and marketers, both in professional relationships with one another and in the availability and emphasis on positions in each field. More so than in Germany, American museums have improved spatial, material, and supervisory conditions so that their institutions can promote goal-oriented learning and the practice of “learning by doing.” However, American society’s high opinion of museum volunteering has also made it possible for large national museums to train, employ, and integrate several hundred volunteers as colleagues. Program developers take visitor expectations seriously: most Americans plan their visits as family excursions, whether to children’s museums or to art museums. Visitors are motivated by subjective experiences, in other words, by the desire to put themselves in other temporal or spatial situations. American visitors prefer specific presentations, and like the aura of objects as historical evidence. In part, American museum visitors attend exhibits to see their values confirmed and to reflect on them. Thus, many presentations allow visitors to use their life experiences as jumping-off points.

Perhaps this is where exhibit presentation differs most markedly between the United States and Europe. While intellectual and thematic approaches dominate European exhibits and more questions are asked of history than answers given, American museums of history and culture strive to present historical narratives—“stories.” These museums integrate elements of successful theme parks into their exhibit design much more boldly than in Europe, and visitors seem to enjoy this form of learning. European experts attending the meeting reflected on these practices and about the limits of the educational missions of museums.

Conference attendees also noticed differences in the way that exhibits deal with identity-forming messages—how people perceive themselves as Americans or Europeans or Germans. Immigrant societies like America seem to feel more at ease with notions of belonging, group-identification, and patriotism than certain European societies, where these topics tend to be critically reflected and questioned.

In their desire to draw in and sustain audiences, American museums consider their institutions to be crossroads for communication, recreation, and commerce. In addition, many museums have been able to cooperate and network with other community organizations. Museum programs held off-site, not only in schools, but also in libraries and churches, have made museums accepted social venues.

Due to favorable legal conditions, American museums have greater access to funds from corporate sponsors and foundations than do German institutions. German professionals often suspect that accepting these

funds opens the door to external influence on project development. American museums do face conflicting situations when public or private sponsors influence or want to influence exhibits, as evidenced in recent years, especially in Washington, D.C. There are also examples to the contrary, however, which as yet lack German counterparts. In late 2003, for instance, the National Museum of American History opened a twenty-thousand-square-foot, \$25 million-dollar exhibit called "America on the Move." Almost all of the funds for the exhibit came from private donations, but only after museum professionals had determined the exhibit concept.

In sum, ICOM-Germany's annual member meeting in Washington offered German museum professionals sufficient opportunities to get to know some American "survival strategies." In many ways, American museums are doing better than German institutions. Learning from and if appropriate applying these strategies to solve some of Germany's museum problems would be a wonderful outcome of this German-American museum dialogue.

*Hans-Martin Hinz*