EDITORIAL

Guest Editorial on Museum Ethics

Georgios A. Papaioannou*

Museum ethics refer to the values on which museums found their operations. Therefore, they constitute a key issue in the museum world. In the last decade, there have been books, papers, institutions and individuals that solely discuss museum ethics. This collection of papers aims to contribute to this discussion. It is the published outcome of a session hosted at the *Fourth International Conference on Information Law* (ICIL, 20th – 21st May 2011, Thessaloniki, Greece).[1] This guest editorial explains the overall conception of this collection and provides an insider's view of the papers.

The idea of a special session on museum ethics in the 2011 ICIL originated from the recent re-emergence of old ethical museum issues in new forms. We refer to, first, the illicit trade of antiquities and museum artefacts of uncertain provenance. Second, to the organisation and management of new museums and exhibitions in Greece and the Mediterranean, which have been characterised as modern and face the challenge to operate, not as passive exhibition spaces any more but, as cultural information centres with an active role in society.[2] And third, to the economic crisis that has hit Europe, especially the South and Greece, and that has forced our everyday museum operations and longer-term plans to face different financial realities.

Andreas Apostolides' and Nikolas Zirganos' *Network: A Documentary* (*Το κύκλωμα*, 2005)[3] exposed the illegal trade of antiquities in Greece and the Mediterranean in the last four decades. The documentary triggered and raised public awareness on illicit antiquities trade and on ethics in museum practices. It was filmed in various locations, such as auction houses, museums, antiques dealers' and collectors' premises in Greece, the UK, USA, Italy, Switzerland, Israel and Germany.

The New Acropolis Museum, inaugurated on 20th June 2009, provoked public debate on a number of ethical issues, including the so called 'Elgin Marbles', the conservation of museum artefacts, rescue excavations, the need of revising national and international laws and codes, visitors' needs, new technologies, tourism and communication with the public. The renovation and opening of a number of museums in Greece and the Mediterranean in the last decade, including the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina in Greece, discussed in this collection by Vasileiou, and the Museum at the Lowest Place on Earth

in Jordan, discussed by Politis and Papaioannou, also advanced the museum ethics discussion, especially on the ways a contemporary museum should operate, manage its collections and address the public through information, exhibits, and experiences on offer. Put simply, in the last decade people became more interested on how museums operate and should operate.

This discussion has a long history. Heritage-related values, concepts of right and wrong conduct, acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, moral rules on how one should act have shaped museum ethics. Museum and cultural heritage ethics owe a lot to the emergence of the values debate in heritage, which started in the Enlightenment period (late 17th - 18th century), advanced in the 19th century of Romanticism and national states, and expanded worldwide in the 20th century by international organisations, such as UNESCO and ICOM. Moreover, museums in the last two centuries became professional establishments, built their own professional profile and acquired professional personnel (curators, museologists, other management, design, interpretation, public relations, safety and facilities staff), organised collections, exhibitions, programmes and activities. In the last fifty years, governments and inter-governmental organisations (e.g. the UN and the EU) have proposed and delivered legal provisions to regulate museums, based upon various codes of ethics issued by professional organisations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM 2006), the Museums Association (MA 2008) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM 2000). Both museum laws and ethics face challenges in the recent 'post-w' era (that is, post-World Wars, post-windows and windows-like computer operating systems, post-world wide web). 'Law' is a strong and imposing word indeed. 'Ethics' is probably a stronger one that gained further importance and became more complicated in the 'post-w' era of multiculturalism, high-speed transportation, instant communication and enormous bulk of information and exchange. Contemporary museum exhibitions, research, information availability, computing technology applications and museum educational parameters enriched the museum ethics discussion in the beginning of the 21st century.

Unsurprisingly, the museum ethics discussion has intensified in the last few years. Its background is formed by well-known codes and conventions, such as the ICOM's, AAM's, and MA's Codes of Ethics for Museums, the UNESCO 1970 and the UNIDROIT 1995 Conventions. Books, articles and special organisations contributed and discussed museum ethics theory, realities and practices.

* Department of Archives, Library Science and Museum Studies, Ionian University, Greece
gpapaioa@ionio.gr

Edson's book (*Museum Ethics*, 1997) can be seen as a starting point followed by several other relevant books and articles in the 21st century, including Brodie *et al.* (2000), Vrdoljak (2008) and Apostolides (2006). Museum Law and Ethics was the main topic of the *ICOM News* magazine in 2010 (ICOM 2010). In 2011, *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics, Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum* (ed. Marstine 2011) was published. Bersterman and Gerstenblith also published papers on museum ethics and on museum legal issues respectively, both in the *Companion to Museum Studies* edited by MacDonald (2011). The *Institute of Museum Ethics* was founded at Seton Hall University (USA) in 2007. A similar organisation in Europe is the *Centre for the Ethics of Cultural Heritage* at Durham University (UK).

In this context, the museum ethics discussion seemed to be at its peak in Greece in 2010–11. During autumn, I had to prepare a lecture on museum legislation in Greece, part of a postgraduate seminar at the Ionian University in Corfu regarding 'Managing and Administrating Cultural Organizations'. Along with the legal aspects of the Greek Law *On the Protection of Antiquities and of Cultural Heritage in General* (FEK 3028/2002) and the pretext of what was to become its 2011 supplement (*Museum Foundation and Accreditation,* FEK 2385/2011), I stressed ethics in contemporary museums and relevant codes. Inevitably, the dilemma would (and did) arise: laws or codes, legal or ethical? And, which is more influential? The discussion that followed was long and lively, indicating that ethics in the museum world constitute an interesting issue with important parameters. We then decided to challenge museologists in a Museum Ethics session at ICIL 2011. Fortunately, in spite of the short notice, museum specialists and researchers we invited replied positively. The proposal received enthusiastic support from the Ionian University, the ICOM Hellenic National Committee and the Greek Ministry of Culture. After weeks of correspondence, summary submissions and conference-related logistical arrangements, the Museum Ethics session was scheduled.

The session was well attended and stimulated lively discussions. Papers dealt with the following topics: museum exhibitions (Gazi), museum research (Bounia), ownership in the digital age (Fouseki and Vacharopoulou, and also Petri), museums and the web 2.0 (Economou), education (Nakou, Argyropoulos *et al.*), illicit trade (Argyropoulos *et al.*, and also Politis and Papaioannou), copyright (Petri), museum information duties (Spinellis), living religious heritage (Alexopoulos) and specific ethics-related museum case studies (Vasileiou, and Politis and Papaioannou). Two more colleagues offered presentations on copyright (Ioannidou) and on museum ethics at the Benaki Museum (Vlizos). These studies are still underway.

The variety of issues addressed in these papers indicates the range and importance of the field of ethics in contemporary museum theory and practice. Gazi examined museum exhibition content (from objects to human remains, sacred significance, looted objects) and their presentation and interpretation, focusing on values communicated in museum exhibitions as well as on princi-

ples of openness and honesty. Her discussion can serve as a starting point for specific cases studies in a variety of museum exhibitions worldwide, which will illustrate how museum ethics work in different environments, societies and countries. Museum ethics constitute a field of museum research, as argued by Bounia. She critically presented and discussed ethical dimensions of museum research in the codes of ethics for museums as well as the central role of codes in museum practices in an intriguing and challenging world.

New technologies are central in contemporary museum practices and raise a number of ethical issues. Fouseki and Vacharopoulou, as well as Economou, dealt with museum ethics in digital collections, web 2.0 and social media with emphasis on ownership and the opportunities for increased public involvement. Fouseki and Vacharopoulou focused on issues of ownership of digital objects, highlighting the relationship between three UK national museums (the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum and the National Portrait Gallery) and Wikipedia. Economou put emphasis on the effect and influences of web 2.0 applications, such as Flickr, Facebook and Twitter on the museum world.

Education is another important field of museum practices today. Two papers addressed ethics in museum education. Nakou, a museum education specialist, analysed the educational role of museums as portrayed in relevant sections of the ICOM's Code of Ethics. On the same track, Argyropoulos and her colleagues in the European Culture Project *Witness the Past*[4] presented and discussed issues on the illicit trade of antiquities through museum educational programs for children in Cyprus, Egypt, Germany and Greece.

Museum duties regarding their information policies and copyright issues have also been tackled here. Petri addressed issues of reproductions and copyright in the digital age. Spinellis examined museums' codes of ethics and offered an analysis of museum information duties and relevant ethical questions, situations and dilemmas.

Last but not least, we had three contributions on specific case studies: religious heritage in Mount Athos, a new exhibition in the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina (Greece) and a new museum in Jordan. Alexopoulos dealt with the sensitive issue of living religious heritage. He addressed the ethical dimensions of museum exhibition design and interpretation in the present-day monastic communities of the Holy Mount Athos. His paper consisted of a detailed account on the matter. Vasileiou presented the refurbishment of the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina, in north-western Greece, one of the many new and/or refurbished museums that opened in Greece in the first decade of the 21st century, where ethics in exhibition design and museum education are considered. Politis and Papaioannou discussed the recently-opened museum at the Lowest Place on Earth in Jordan. Their paper presented ethics-related issues and practices, such as looting of antiquities, the relation with the local community and inter-faith relations.

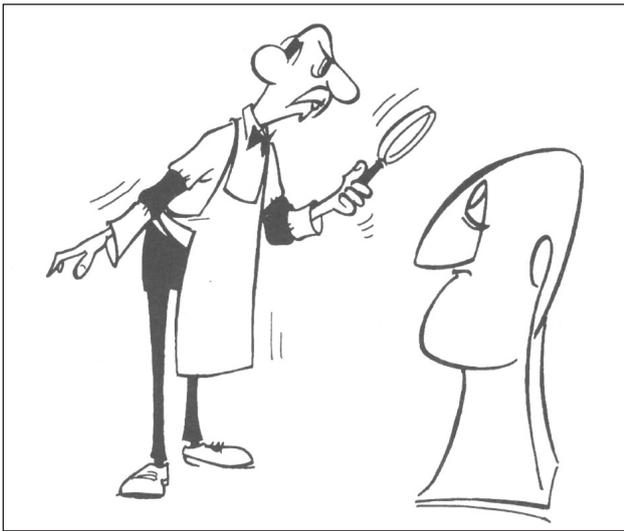The most important conclusions that came out of this collection are that, first, more research is needed in the

Fig. 1: Drawing by A. Sali

field of museum ethics. Museum ethics can be researched and studied from their theory to their connections with laws and practices. Second, we need specific case studies to address differences and trace commonalities, so that we assess the extent to which codes of ethics are useful in practice. Third, museum ethics have acquired new dimensions. Twenty-first-century challenges, such as new technologies, educational needs and demands, and information management, easy access and dissemination, have been added to the old ethical concerns, such as illicit trade and museum organisation. Information management is probably the top priority in museum ethics research, because of the great increase of information in a short span of time.

Looking into the future, we still need to address urgent old ethical as well as very practical matters, such as the illicit trade of antiquities and monuments at risk owed to wars, natural disasters, environmental damages and political decisions. This is a priority in both the fields of museum ethics and applied museology. Last but not least, through discussion on museum ethics we can derive frameworks and guidelines in terms of policies, strategies and practices that will help us assess the museum's social role and dimensions in given societies and circumstances. To that end, museum professionals, governing bodies, cultural institutions, universities and research centres can contribute.

Before readers explore this collection of papers in more detail, I would like to extend a warm thanks to the organisers, supporting institutions and participants at the ICIL 2011. I particularly thank Anastasia Sali, Rector of the Ionian University and Professor of Museology, who assisted in the organisation of the Museum Ethics session and kindly offered one of her drawings to promote this publication (**figure 1**). I also thank the authors whose texts feature in this special collection of papers and the staff of the *Journal of Conservation & Museum Studies* (JCMS). Some time lapsed until the papers were edited and finalised. During the 7th World Archaeology Congress held in Jordan at the beginning of 2013, I met Anastasia Sakellariadi, managing editor of JCMS, who encouraged me to publish these papers in the Journal as a special collection. So last, but not least, a very special thank you to Anastasia Sakellariadi for her extraordinary support and invaluable assistance in making this publication a reality.

Notes

References

AAM 2000 *American Alliance of Museums Code of Ethics for Museums.* Available at: http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums [Accessed 11 July 2013]

Apostolides, A 2006 *Looting and Antiquities' Trade* (in Greek). Athens: Agra Publishers.

Bersterman, T 2011 Museum Ethics. In: Macdonald, S (ed.) *A Companion to Museum Studies.* West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 431–41.

Brodie, N, Doole, J and **Watson, P** 2000 *Stealing History: The Illicid Trade in Cultural Material.* Cambridge: The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.

Edson, G (ed.) 1997 *Museum Ethics.* London: Routledge.

Gerstenblith, P 2011 Museum Practice: Legal Issues. In: Macdonald, S (ed.) *A Companion to Museum Studies.* West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 442–456.

ICOM 2006 *International Council of Museums Code of Ethics for Museums.* Available at: http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/ [Accessed 11 July 2013]

ICOM 2009 *Κώδικας Δεοντολογίας του ICOM για τα Μουσεία*, translated to Greek by S Lappas. Athens: ICOM Greece. Available at: http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icom-greece/code-of-ethics_GR_01.pdf [Accessed 24 September 2013]

ICOM 2010 *ICOM News Magazine*, 63(1).

MA 2008 *Museums Association Code of Ethics for Museums.* Available at: http://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics [Accessed 11 July 2013]

Marstine, J C (ed.) 2011 *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics. Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum.* London and New York: Routledge.

UNESCO 1970 *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.* Paris. Available at: http://

portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13039&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [Accessed 11 July 2013]

UNIDROIT 1995 *Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects.* Rome. Available at: http://www.uni-droit.org/english/conventions/1995culturalproperty/main.htm [Accessed 11 July 2013]

Vrdoljak, A F 2008 *International Law, Museums and the Return of Cultural Objects.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.