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Representing Difficult Histories and Contested Heritage in Museums

Suzie Thomas¹

Abstract

Museums are one source of leisure, with visits forming activities for local community members in their free time, as well as touristic attractions for visitors on vacation. For many people, museums are also a source of knowledge, and they perceive them to be an authority from which they expect to receive verified information. This can take place, for example, through organised school and college visits, visits made in free time or through participation in museum-led projects and events. Therefore, the decisions that museums make about how to present history, and what (or more importantly whose) history they present, and what strategies they employ to present this history, have the potential to inform and influence perspectives on the past in the present. When this contains difficult memories connected to warfare, atrocities or discrimination and oppression based on ethnicity, gender or anything else, museums have to be especially mindful of how they treat and present these topics.

In this chapter, I explore some of the frameworks informing representation in museums and use case studies from within Finland and elsewhere. I investigate some of the ethical questions that emerge around the politics of representation. While there are no hard and fast answers to how museums should engage with difficult and painful history, I suggest reflection upon the impacts of challenging public perceptions through innovative approaches to museum displays. These themes also intersect with the wider question of the social responsibility of museums.

Keywords: contested heritage, museum exhibitions, museal silence, conflict, difficult history

Introduction

Museums are sources of leisure and tourism, as well as for education and knowledge gain. Despite some aspirations of pushing boundaries and challenging preconceptions (Dodd et al. 2013), many visitors still expect an entertaining and enjoyable, possibly not overly intellectually taxing, experience at the museum (Falk, Moussouri & Coulson 1998). At the same time, debate concerning the

1. This chapter has been peer reviewed.

social responsibility of museums continues to take place. Research acknowledges on the one hand that museums are perceived by many as an authority voice, transmitting the truth to its patrons (Ashley 2005), while on the other hand the museum has also been conceived of for some years as a forum, a space in which the visitor can hear and find their own voice (Bradburne 1999). As many of the chapters in this volume reveal, museums therefore find themselves at the forefront of efforts to increase public participation and co-creation or even co-authorship (see also Niemi, this volume). This presents museum staff with more and more ethical dilemmas as they work to interact more fully with society. Greater engagement brings with it greater risks, especially when themes to be discussed do not naturally engender consensus with their audiences.

In this chapter I discuss some of the many potentially difficult or controversial topics that museums might choose (or choose not) to cover in their exhibitions and interpretation strategies, not least the almost universal challenge of how to deal with the legacies of past conflicts. These are a part of the human past that can be considered as contested heritage, since there is rarely a consensus on such events or their legacy and impact, as they often depend on an individual's or community's particular perspective. I first present some examples from Finland, before broadening out to explore the literature on research into this topic from around the world. My Finnish museum case studies primarily address the 20th-century conflict legacies of the Second World War (WWII), and, even more sensitive despite occurring further back in time, the continued impact of the Finnish Civil War² of 1918. I then briefly explore the violent and ongoing contested heritage legacies of nuclear warfare and weapons testing with examples from Japan and the Marshall Islands, interpreting or reconciling long-term sectarian violence with an example from Northern Ireland, and the impact of domestic terrorism with an example from the USA.

Difficult Issues

The means by which practitioners, communities and institutions address so-called difficult issues has attracted debate for some time. Scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) suggest that certain aspects of the past and of identities can be purposefully silenced, subjugated even, as different power struggles express themselves through the creation of official history. Helaine Silverman has noted that the concept of contested cultural heritage has been recognised by researchers from various fields with an interest in human society and activity, as different sectors of society aim to use heritage to suit their own agendas or narratives. She observes that the use of contested heritage can be seen in the ways in which:

2. In Finland there are different names for what is widely known by outsiders as the Civil War, which also indicate the political viewpoints around the conflict, including: “vapaussota (War of Liberty), kansalaissota or sisällissota (Civil War), luokkasota (Class War), punakapina (Red Rebellion), torpparikapina (Crofters’ Rebellion), veljessota (the war between brothers)”. Available at <http://www.war-memorial.net/Finnish-Civil-War-3.35> [Last accessed 28 January 2020]

... religious, ethnic, national, political and other groups manipulate (appropriate, use, misuse, exclude, erase) markers and manifestations of their own and others' cultural heritage as a means for asserting, defending or denying critical claims to power, land, legitimacy and so forth. (Silverman 2010, p. 1)

Issues of remembering but, equally crucially, forgetting at individual, local, national, regional and global scales have been addressed by many researchers. Paul Connerton (2008), for example, suggested seven types of forgetting for different acts leading to the erasure or forgetting of cultural memory, which work at a societal scale and may be necessary for a society's survival or ability to move on from a traumatic period in its history. The categories that Connerton (2008, p. 59) proposed are:

- repressive erasure
- prescriptive forgetting
- forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity
- structural amnesia
- forgetting as annulment
- forgetting as planned obsolescence
- forgetting as humiliated silence.

Without expanding too heavily upon these processes here, it is clear that these concepts are also relevant to museum practice, especially to strategies concerning which stories to present and which to omit. As reflectors of society, museums have a role in promoting which histories are remembered and which are not presented. These considerations relate to the well-being of a society, particularly after a traumatic event such as civil war, occupation or colonisation (see also Guttorm, this volume), and reflect again on the perceived roles of museums as representations of the wider community or even nation.

Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner (2019) more recently discussed the ways in which museums use silence, suggesting that this can occur in eight distinct ways:

- silences in the historical record as collected by museums
- museums being silenced by external pressures
- museums' collusion in society's silences
- museums using silence obliquely
- museums thinking they have nothing to say
- silence by design
- museums staying respectfully silent
- communities wishing to remain silent.

Although they do not reference him, their proposal is similar to Connerton's notion of forgetting, as according to Mason and Sayner "silence is an integral part of processes of remembering" (2019, p. 5). Their eight ways to think about museal silence indicate everything from strategic decisions concerning collection policies, to political forces at play (not least access to government funding, i.e.,

silence by external pressures), to perceived sensitivity towards and with the communities affected (see also Myllykoski, this volume, for a suggestion of an expansion of these silences). Their framework is therefore useful for thinking about how museums deal with contested heritage topics such as uncomfortable or shameful periods in history.

Museums and Difficult Issues

Despite Mason and Sayner's noted forms of silence within museums, museums are nonetheless taking the role of forum or becoming understood as contact zones (see Schorch 2013 for a critique of this viewpoint), and becoming spaces where debate can take place, even about difficult issues. This approach has been very successful in some cases, but has also sometimes caused unexpected problems. It raises questions regarding the responsibility of museums and their staff, and the extent to which they are equipped to deal with the outcomes.

Norway-based museum director Kathrin Pabst has offered insights from her research about contested heritage in museums, and has noted some negative outcomes, where museums and their staff are challenged to deal with the consequences of opening up painful issues. As she observes:

Projects may deal with themes of war, violence in closed institutions, violation of human rights, the limits of the freedom of speech or the treatment of minorities. It may also touch upon the dark sides of contemporary society: poverty, mental health, or the abuse of alcohol. It is common to all these issues that the themes may trigger strong emotions and reactions among all persons involved: the individuals who are about to relate something difficult and painful they have experienced, visitors who must react to these testimonies and handle their own feelings attached to the revealed stories, the local society and its members who might have to reconsider how they understand their own identity, and not least the museum employees who must respond simultaneously to their own and other people's feelings. (Pabst 2019, pp. 29–30)

It seems reasonable to suggest in this context that some topics are simply too taboo for museums to tackle (perhaps as a part of museums staying respectfully silent), especially if they possess the possibility of acting as a trigger to past traumas (see also Pollard 2016 for a discussion of trigger warnings in conflict archaeology teaching concerning war graves).

Difficult Histories and Contested Heritage in Finnish Museums

My research in recent years has focused on the presentation of WWII, especially the experiences of Finnish Lapland, in museum displays (Thomas & Koskinen-Koivisto 2016; Seitsonen et al. 2018; Thomas, Koskinen-Koivisto & Hekkuriainen 2019). In focusing on the material legacy of the so-called Lapland War

(1944–1945) in particular, colleagues and I have noted the apparent down-playing of the experiences of this particular region and its residents, especially in comparison with the wartime narratives of the south of the country (see also Kivimäki 2012, p. 483). Indeed, we found that in national museums such as the Finnish Military Museum, the Lapland War seems marginalized in the narrative presented to the public, in comparison to the Winter War (1939–1940) and the Continuation War (1941–1944)³, which occupy a far greater area of permanent displays.

Even in the Finnish Sámi Museum based in the Siida building in Inari, Finnish Lapland, the impact of WWII enjoys only passing mention in the museum's permanent exhibitions. This is especially curious given the significant impact of the war on Sámi life, with many experiencing displacement and evacuation during the war, and the period signifying a rupture of Sámi culture (Lehtola 2015, Thomas & Koskinen-Koivisto 2016)⁴.

Exceptions to this apparent museal silence on the Lapland War can be found in temporary exhibitions, such as *Wir waren Freunde/Olimme ystäviä/We were Friends*, which exhibited in the Provincial Museum of Lapland in Rovaniemi, running from April 2015 to January 2016 (Alariesto et al. 2015). The exhibition focused on the period 1941–1944, the years prior to the Lapland War itself, when German military and others associated with the German military project of WWII (for example, labourers of Organisation Todt and Soviet prisoners of war) were present in large numbers in Finland's northernmost region. Themes on display included fraternisations between German soldiers and local Finnish women, the system of bartering that developed and the media and propaganda, particularly in newspapers, of the time. An exit survey indicated that the exhibition engendered a range of reactions, which, as has been noted elsewhere (Thomas, Koskinen-Koivisto & Hekkuriainen 2019), to some extent varied according to the nationality of the visitors surveyed. Hence, many local Finnish museum visitors were positive about the exhibition's addressing of the realities of everyday life during that period in their region, something that some felt had been neglected for too long. German visitors also often appeared to appreciate an exhibition that did not focus on the negative aspects of Nazism but rather depicted the German soldiers as human beings. However, visitors with other national backgrounds, for example those from Switzerland and the UK, seemed far less comfortable with the whole premise of the exhibition, expressing concerns

3. The Winter War and so-called Continuation War were both fought against the Soviet Union, involved the whole country and garnered the assistance of Germany. In contrast, the later Lapland War focused specifically on the north only, and was against former co-belligerent Germany (at the behest of the Soviet Union following a treaty agreement). It has been seen as both only of marginal significance to the rest of the country, and also as a source of some national embarrassment following the apparent friendship with Nazi Germany (Seitsonen et al. 2018).

4. It is important to note that, at the time of writing, the permanent exhibitions at Siida were due for renovation, and it is likely that the refreshed exhibitions will also address sensitive issues such as the impacts of both WWII and, indeed, of Finnish colonialism on Sámi culture and identity (see also Aikio 2018 for reflections on the need to develop "a Sámi way of doing museum work").

at the lack of problematisation, as they saw it, of the very presence of Nazis in Finnish Lapland, given what we know about the many atrocities that the regime carried out. A consciousness on the part of the museum staff concerning the potential controversy of their temporary exhibition is also found in the fact that the exhibition was timed to be dismantled and removed before late January, a period when many Israeli tourists visit Rovaniemi and the surrounding area (Thomas, Koskinen-Koivisto & Hekkuraiinen 2019).

Another, in this case more permanent, exception⁵ to the apparent marginalisation of the Lapland War is found in the Salla Museum of War and Reconstruction (figure 1) in the Salla municipality, Finnish Lapland. The town of Salla itself is nowadays New Salla, with the original settlement stranded in the buffer area between Finland and the Russian Federation, following Finland's loss of territory to the Soviet Union as a result of WWII. The museum, situated in the former railway station house, features artefacts from the time of the Lapland War, and information about the work of reconstruction that stretched into the 1950s and beyond. The burning of Lapland and the recovery period after the war are bound up with the story of Salla itself, and hence the war and reconstruction are presented and understood as local history within the museum (see also Koskinen-Koivisto 2019).



Figure 1. External view of the *Salla Museum of War and Reconstruction*. Photo by the author.

In addition to challenges in addressing at least some of the events of WWII, researchers have also commented on the apparent enduring sensitivity around the Finnish Civil War, already over a century ago. This war took place shortly after Finland gained its independence from the Russian Empire, with international intervention too as Soviet troops supported the Red side, and Germans the White side (Seitsonen & Kunnas 2009).

5. There are other exceptions too, where there are permanent exhibitions on the Lapland War such as the *Lätäsenon saksalaiset asemat / Järämän linnoitus / "Sturmbock" 1944* museum in Järämä.

As Anu Kantola (2014, p. 92) has observed, “civil wars in particular give rise to complex memory politics”, going on to note that it took 90 years in the case of the city of Tampere, hit by deadly battles that marked the defeat of the Reds in 1918, before it seemed “possible to organise a memorial of the war” (Kantola 2014, p. 93). The *Tampere 1918* exhibition, still a permanent fixture at the Vapriikki Museum Centre in Tampere (figure 2), opened in 2008 alongside a suite of other activities and events intended to help commemorate and also offer reconciliation against the backdrop of still-recognised societal (and sometimes familial) divisions caused by the schism of the Civil War. Elsewhere within Finland, there are memorials for both Reds and Whites, although memorials for the victorious latter group are more prevalent, with White-dominated commemoration events overshadowing efforts to commemorate the Red side for many years following the conflict (Szpunar 2012). There have nonetheless been efforts to document more of the memorials for both sides, with the Finnish Labour Museum Wersitas, also in Tampere, creating a database for memorials to Reds.⁶ The database contains elementary information and photographs. Anne Heimo identifies the complex nature of the information on this database, even in the present time:

An interesting feature is that all the photographs have been digitally manipulated so that all the names engraved on the memorials are unreadable. This is to ensure the privacy of the dead, which in this case the Data Protection Ombudsman has regarded important, because the memorials are considered politically sensitive even today. (Heimo 2014, p. 151)



Figure 2. Section of the Tampere 1918 exhibition at the Museum Centre Vapriikki. Visitors encounter a bodiless firing range. Photo: Nina Robbins.

The difficult aspect of this Civil War, like many others across the globe, is the very closeness of it. Not only is it still relatively recent in the sense of having happened only a century ago, but it is also close, as in personal, because so

6. Available at <http://www.tyovaenliike.fi/punaisten-muistomerkit/> [Last accessed 28 January 2020]

many families still recognize and carry the legacy of the divisions that the Civil War caused. In national narratives deriving from conflicts against an outside enemy, it is easier for citizens to find a kind of unity against a common other. Geographer Anssi Paasi (2003), for example, has noted the importance of constructing a regional identity in opposition to others on the outside. When the conflict is against fellow citizens, even brothers and sisters, it becomes much more difficult to heal the rifts, and to move on as a nation. These are arguably cases where a museum professional needs to be extremely careful in how they portray past events, “museums’ collusion in society’s silences”.

Difficult Histories and Contested Heritage – A global perspective

In some cases, sites associated with extreme trauma and suffering have experienced a kind of transformation into symbols of peace. This is the case with nuclear war heritage such as Japan’s Hiroshima Peace Memorial⁷ (including the Peace Memorial Park and Hiroshima’s iconic nuclear survivor, the *Genbaku* or *A-bomb Dome*) and Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site⁸ in the Marshall Islands. Both are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and both, despite their association with the most destructive and deadly weapons ever used, are symbols of peace, according to their UNESCO descriptions. Their inclusion, also as reminders of war and destruction (without which these two places would not have been considered for World Heritage nomination) are already somewhat paradoxical to the traditional notions of heritage: “The bomb and the bulldozer symbolise the agencies that transform the world apace at the cost of both⁹ aspects of heritage” (Lowenthal 2005, p. 86).

In the case of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, inscribed into the World Heritage List in 1996, it can be seen that the call for peace, and a direct and deliberate association of peace with the city where the first atomic bomb used in war fell in 1945, was sought from early on. Already in 1949 Japan enacted a law to re-plan and rebuild the city, called the Hiroshima Peace Memorial City Construction Law (Utaka 2007, p. 37). The Peace Museum in Hiroshima takes its own strategy of communicating peace, but also confronting visitors with the visceral, shocking horror of atomic attack through individual artefacts and stories (Giamo 2003, pp. 717–718). At the same time however, observers have also criticized the museum for focusing on the atomic victimisation of Japan and aspiring to world peace through the abolishment of nuclear weapons, without sufficiently acknowledging the other atrocities of the war, including those committed by Japan itself (Giamo 2003). Recalling Mason and Sayner’s forms of museal silence, this approach could perhaps represent both “museums being silenced by external pressures” and “museums’ collusion in society’s silences”.

7. Available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/775> [Last accessed 10 October 2019]

8. Available at <http://whe.unesco.org/en/list/1339> [Last accessed 10 October 2019]

9. In the context of this quotation, Lowenthal refers to both cultural and natural heritage.

The still uninhabitable Bikini Atoll, in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, had its indigenous population evacuated (but not protected from radioactive fallout) to make way for US nuclear weapons tests (Smith 2009). It included in its World Heritage nomination a plan to create a Peace Museum, to be located in the Marshall Islands' capital, Majuro (ICOMOS 2010, pp. 17–18). Although the museum has not yet materialised, the theme continues here of making associations with peace in spite of the Atoll's inexorable connection with nuclear weapons and destruction.

It is not only transnational warfare or state-sanctioned colonial appropriation of places for re-use in military testing that invite questions of appropriate interpretation and musealisation. In Northern Ireland, a British-ruled section of the island of Ireland with a long and extremely complex history of conflict and sectarianism, museums have faced dilemmas concerning what parts of that history to show, and how to do so. Elizabeth Crooke has long documented and analysed the depiction of this cross-community conflict, known as the Troubles. She has noted that the continued sectarian nature of community identity in Northern Ireland has meant that in the past museums have not been willing, or even perhaps able, to address many aspects of Irish history, as it often "has more potential to antagonise than to gratify" (Crooke 2001, p. 120). According to her research, not only is there concern that history may become instrumentalised to prolong and justify continued unrest, but also that the issues behind certain events and how they are remembered are so nuanced and complex that they cannot be displayed without causing personal pain to many. Concerning remembering and forgetting in museums and in society more broadly, she suggests:

It is also important to be reflective and accept that time must pass before the ability to represent certain aspects of the past will emerge. Furthermore, we need to respect the people and allow some personal memories not to become public history. We may not have the right to all knowledge. (Crooke 2001, p. 136)

Another museum closely associated with painful and difficult events, although confined to one day, is the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum in the USA. Built on the site of the Murrah Building, where on 19th April 1995 the infamous Oklahoma City bombing took place, its perpetrator a US-born white supremacist terrorist, the National Memorial monument and museum form an important focus for national reflection and commemoration (figure 3). Aside from the national memorial, the museum itself offers an intensely emotional experience, employing techniques designed to make the visitor feel the enormity of the attack and its impact. This includes a moment early on into the exhibition experience where visitors are required to sit in a room and listen to the recording of a court hearing that took place in the neighbouring building. Visitors are told beforehand that some minutes into the recording, they will hear the explosion as it happened. Therefore, with the next part of the museum inaccessible until the recording has played in full, visitors have no choice but to endure the tension of listening to a couple of minutes of mundane discussion, knowing that any

second the explosion, and the screams of fear and panic, will be heard. Rather than forgetting or silencing, every visitor is compelled to remember, and in a way relive, the very moment that the attack happened.



Figure 3. Part of the National Memorial in Oklahoma City, USA. The museum building stands next to the outdoor memorial area. Photo by the author.

In another ethically questionable strategy, photographs from the rescue attempts in the aftermath are displayed, including a once iconic image of a fireman carrying a severely injured little girl out of the wreckage of the Murrah Building. The text explains that the child later died from her injuries, and that both the fireman and the child's family had expressed displeasure at the image's wide use to represent the Oklahoma City bombing. Despite this acknowledgement of their wishes and concerns, the planners of the exhibition nonetheless decided to show this tragic and, in my opinion, inappropriate image. This seems to be the antithesis of "museums staying respectfully silent". It is unclear why the planners made this decision, although the fame of the photograph, a Pulitzer Prize awardee, perhaps led to the planners reasoning that because the image was already so well known it would seem odd to visitors if it was not on display.

The exhibition however, and even more so the National Memorial itself, serve an important purpose in the context of providing a space for collective grieving and memorialisation, and through that process a search for optimism. This has led some observers to label the National Memorial as "an exemplar for how memorials, through the shared experience of grief, communicate renewal" (Veil, Sellnow & Heald 2011, p. 164).

Discussion

In the examples in this chapter we have seen that dealing with contested heritage, and in particular heritage connected to conflict and acts of atrocity, is not a challenge confined only to cultural history museums in Finland, but may be a

universal issue for museum practice and theory. There are many other types of culture or art, which may be difficult to present – for example art installations that address taboo subjects such as sexualities or violence. The focus of this chapter has rather been the impact of past historical events, especially those that have caused continued controversy or that are open to different, contrasting interpretations and understandings. In the case of Finland, perhaps the two best known difficult historical phases are those of the Civil War and WWII. Other periods that may continue to be difficult to address, although they are memorialised in places, include the Finnish Famine of 1866–1868¹⁰.

I have tried to provide a glimpse into just some of the difficult, painful and controversial issues that museums sometimes find themselves dealing with (or not). I have presented some examples from around the world, as well as focusing on some core examples from Finnish museums. As other scholars have noted, museums, as key cultural institutions and transmitters of accepted history, have a particular place in the public understanding and consumption of particular narratives. They also have strategies available to them to help make decisions about what to depict, what to leave out and who to include in or exclude from that process. These can be affected by what already exists in museum collections, but also in the ways in which those collections are interpreted, hence the “museums thinking they have nothing to say” may simply need to re-read their collections to see what other stories can be told through their objects (Mason and Sayner 2019, p. 11). There is a proverb that “time is a great healer”, and certainly with regard to traumatic events, it would seem that, as time goes on, it does indeed become easier for certain traumatic pasts to be discussed in a public sphere such as a museum. At the same time, as with the case of the Finnish Civil War, we also see that some events are so traumatic at a national level that their discussion remains difficult, even when later events such as WWII have become open to exhibition and interpretation.

Museums are at once an ideal forum for encouraging societies to reflect upon past actions and their impacts, while at the same time being in a position where it may be difficult and, some might argue, even inappropriate to scratch at some of those wounds. In this sense, it is not only accountability to government or even funders (see also Kaitavuori, this volume) that might affect a museum’s willingness to address difficult issues, but also the question of whether museums are equipped to deal with the after-effects, such as triggering recollections of past traumas in its visitors. As Connerton has discussed, forgetting can be just as crucial as remembering, from the individual to the societal level, and in some cases it is an essential element of moving on. These processes also affect museum practice. Hence, the observations of Mason and Sayner on museal silence are likely to continue to be a useful means for making sense of museum exhibitions on difficult issues.

10. Historian Andrew Newby has been documenting memorials, place names and other markers that refer to the *Great Hunger Years* in Finland at <https://katovuodet1860.wordpress.com/> [Last accessed 28 January 2020]

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